

THE
RIVER

BY
EDEN
PHILLPOTTS



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THE RIVER

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

LYING PROPHETS

CHILDREN OF THE MIST

SONS OF THE MORNING

THE STRIKING HOURS

ALSO BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HUMAN BOY

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NICHOLAS EDGETCOMBE'S HOME



THE RIVER

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

METHUEN & CO.

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THE RIVER

BOOK I

THE RIVER

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

IMMORTALS AND A MAN

FROM the rapt loneliness of her cradle, from her secret fountains, where the red sundew glimmers and cotton grasses wave unseen, Dart comes wandering southward with a song. Her pools and silent places mirror the dawn; noontide sunshine glitters along the granite aprons of her thousand falls; the wind catches her volume leaping downward, and flings it aloft into rainbows by day and moonlit veils by night. Beneath the echoing hills she passes, under the grey rain or silver mist she takes her most musical course; and presently, the richer by many a little sister river, grows into adult beauty of being, swells to the noblest stream in all the West Country, descends from her high places and winds, full fraught with mystery and loveliness, into the lives of men. Thereupon legends arise from her crystal depths; stories, sinister enough, are whispered; romance awakens to brood by her deep reaches and hanging woods. Henceforth humanity grows concerned with Dart, and, even as man pollutes her current with drosses and accretions from caldron or vat, so by him is her character clouded, her fair name maligned.

A mother of old story, with haunted pools; a flowing record of the past, whose silvery scroll is written close with chronicles of joy and grief, Dart hides many a deep grave beneath her bosom, yet still takes the little

children to her heart, that they may play there and shine like pink pearls upon her amber shallows. From happiest memory to darkest sorrow, ever rolling, ever changing, the river strays; and the nature of mankind is reflected in her many moods, in her peaceful and sunlit summer-time, in her autumn torrents and winter darkness banked with snow. To-day she glides and swirls in sleepy backwaters, and twinkles in a thousand separate threads over the great rocks; to-morrow she leaps and thunders cherry-red, with a storm message from the mountains; to-day the sub-aqueous mosses gasp as her receding stream leaves them shrunk under full blaze of light; to-morrow she foams in freshet, tosses her wild locks on high, shouts hoarsely, with echoing reverberations in deep gorges and old secret caves, drowns half a fathom deep the little flower that has budded and bloomed with trust beside her brink.

Innocent as yet of all story—a stream unblessed, uncursed—this virgin river shall be found winding upon Dartmoor's bosom. Untamed she riots here among the everlasting hills; untrammelled she leaps down her stairways, and rejoices to run her course. She brings goodness to the green things, light and flashing fire to the stone, life to the sequestered dwellers that throng her banks. As yet no bridge, save a rainbow on the mist, has ever spanned her stream, no wheel has stolen her strength, no keel has ridden her, no oar has struck. Younger than the young noon, older than the whole life of man, she passes from solitude to solitude; slides onward in sheets and twined threads of glassy crystal; mirrors the dark peat and shining gravel, the rush and thistle and cushions of pale ling bloom; she cuddles tiny islets where small rats dwell; she dimples into laughter when the trout rise; she smiles with a tremor of bubbles and shining wake as the flat-nosed otter paddles up stream and leads her cubs to their hidden nursery. Out of the wilderness she passes onward and downward, with many a pause and acceleration, with many a curve and sweep and soft round confluxure, over marsh and peat tye and hollow to the

land of ancient bridges, of forests, and placid water-meadows. Here red cattle come and little calves drink ; in spring-time the sallows make a dawn of sudden pale gold ; gorse and broom flame beside the great salmon pools ; and bluebells bring down a gleam of sky to the verdant earth.

But there is a region near her sources, where the river winds under huge hills crowned and scattered as to their grassy undulations with stone. The high lands clamber round about to a wild horizon that is roughly hurled upward in mighty confusion against the sky ; and from the deep channels of the river's passage her music lulls or throbs at the will of the wind, and wakes or ceases suddenly as the breezes blow. Here, beneath the conical mitre of Longaford Tor, in Dartmoor's central waste and fastness, she sweeps along the fringes of a primeval forest. Upon the steep foot-hills of the tor, crooked, twisted, convulsed by centuries of western winds and bitter winters, like a regiment of old, chained and tortured ghosts, stands an ancient assemblage of dwarf oaks : that wonder of the Moor named Wistman's Wood. Grey lichens shroud each venerable bough, and heavy mosses—bronze and black—drip like wet hair from the joints and elbows of the trees, climb aloft within a span of the new year's leaves and fruit. In the deep laps of these shattered oaks, where rot and mould have built up rich root-room, grow whortleberries that hang out red bells in spring and ripen their purple fruit beside the acorn harvest in autumn ; ivy strangles the sturdy dwarfs ; the chaos of fern and boulders from which they grow swallows their fallen limbs and carcasses, but still they endure and still stoutly obey the call of the seasons. Their amber buds cast sheath at each new-born April ; their lemon catkins powder the leaves again in May. After a thousand years life moves yet in their knotty hearts, and the young green of them is as fair as the fresh spike of the wild wood rush renewed beneath their shadows, or the dream-like corydalis, that here passes her brief summer at their feet.

Transcendent age marks this ancestral wood and each hoary stock and stone within it broods abstracted, breathes the heavy air of eld. Here ancient meets with ancient and fashions a home and a resting-place for night. Night, indeed, by taper of star and moon, moves familiarly through these dim glades, knows each stem and bough for a friend, wakens her secret pensioners in holt and den. Now red foxes dwell in Wistman's Wood, and yesterday a mother wolf suckled her litter there. Here Time shall be surprised asleep; here the unchanging serpent, roughly wakened, shall uncoil her wheel, curled like a woman's necklet, and flow away over the rocks, in a sudden rivulet of ebony and silver and olive brown. The trees laugh at their frail footstools of granite, for the transparent egg they hold aloft in a pigeon's nest is stronger than the stone. One bears the eternal, but these crystalline giants of quartz, felspar, and mica, are playthings for winter and the latter rain. The years nibble and gnaw each monstrous boulder; the frost stabs them; the ages wait their attrition with patience. Yet this wood of Wistman indues its youth like a garment, and the second spring of the oak annually bedecks each leafy crown with rosettes of carmine foliage that glow against dark summer green. Acorns also yearly feed the doves, or, sinking into earth, rise again and take the places of their fathers. Rowans are scattered through the grove, and their berries, lighting autumn-time, weave scarlet into the foliage of the oaks. Then, the last leaf fallen, this forest sprawls in hibernal nakedness, like a grey web flung over the sere or snow of the wintry hills. Descended from trees that formed the bygone Chase of Dartmoor, these old oaks still flourish and defy death. It has been conjectured that from the Celtic springs their name, for Wistman's Wood may haply have been uisg-maen-coed, "the stony wood by the water"—a description of the spot most just and perfect. Here, at least, these two immortals—the stream and the forest—continue to survey each other through the centuries, and, still flourishing in the proper polity of green wood and

living water, preserve a melodious and eternal tryst with time.

Upon a day when autumn was at hand and the foliage of the trees already turned to warmth and ripeness, there appeared a man beside the confines of the wood, and this human figure struck the highest note of colour in that great scene. Sunlight leapt suddenly along the heights above Dart, huge cloud shadows climbed the eastern hills; and in the midst, where planes of light and shade, green grass, chocolate peat and grey stone mingled upon the slopes and valleys of Longaford Tor, there glowed sudden harmonies of ruddy hue. The man was seated amidst russet of fern and glittering coils of wire, with background of the waning foliage. His hair was also red, his face was freckled, his hands displayed a rufous down upon their backs and wrists. Only his eyes, though speckled red in the iris, were mainly grey and matched the stone upon which he sat.

The nature of Nicholas Edgecombe's occupation had puzzled chance spectators. He was perched beside a spreading bough, and therefrom, by bright threads, depended a zinc bucket. Within it lay a flat iron, and from time to time the man set pail and weight spinning freely, then he loosed the utensil, examined those bright threads from which it hung and flung them into a shining pile at his elbow. Thus he continued to spin in metal, for each object contained fourteen strands of copper wire, and each, when finished, was a deadly little noose, bright as red gold, pliant as whip cord. Edgecombe thus spun rabbit snares, for the man was a warrener, and he dwelt here alone in the theatre of his occupation.

Nicholas wore rusty velveteen; leathern gaiters cased his legs, and upon his head, stuck at the back of it, a rough deer-stalker was set. His garments were worn and bleached about the seams, while upon his right shoulder shone a patch of leather, where his gun usually rested. His form was large, powerful and loosely jointed, his face, framed in a regular mould, lacked

distinction, yet indicated some strength of character and firmness without pugnacity. His mouth moved and twisted involuntarily at his work, and sometimes his tongue followed his hands, as an illiterate writer's will unconsciously pursue the laboured progress of a pen from left to right. Between intervals of spinning, when more material had to be measured off and cut from the wire coils, the warrener whistled tunelessly and looked now and again immediately before him, where blue smoke rose from the chimney of his cabin.

The man's home stood a hundred yards distant upon the hillside. It was no more than a square hut of timber under a tar-pitched roof—a solitary spot in the wide desolation, from whose door neither companion roof-tree nor the least evidence of human activity was visible. Three miles of heath and bog, wild hillside and green morass separated Edgecombe from his kind, and his days, perhaps as lonely as any lived in England, passed here at the midst of a great rabbit warren. From his own standpoint, life was good, sufficiently full, pleasantly varied. A pound a week he earned, and laboured for it by night and by day. Night was his familiar. Much of his work passed in darkness, and the earth, so seen, was to him as close and common as at noon-tide. The ways of the nocturnal hours were understood by Edgecombe, because he possessed a fair measure of intelligence ripened in loneliness; and while he often lived for labour alone, as his toil required, yet he lacked not activity of mind, and, devout by instinct, he carried his faith into the nightly watches. The invisible wind's utterance amid unseen things, the shooting star, the summer lightning, distant thunders, or the stealthy snow falling out of darkness, had once made his God fearful to him. With closer intercourse and better knowledge, these revelations were as good as the phenomena of daylight. He lived in the heart of natural things and read them simply and at first hand. Similarly he read his Bible. He was thirty years old and had scarcely looked upon a city in his life. Within Dartmoor's borders Nicholas Edgecombe was born and

bred ; and, left an orphan at an early age, he had earned a living since boyhood by following the congenial calling of his father. With good record as an under game-keeper he was now lifted to sole control over the wild rabbit warrens of Wistman, where they extend between the arms of Dart. He dwelt among immortal things and held himself immortal. Death represented his office, and thousands of rabbits had perished between his red fingers ; yet life was his handicraft, and the science of life ; he protected his countless charges, stood for their first friend under nature, against manifold foes on earth or in air, and, when the end came, he looked to it that no small beast should suffer more than its proper pang.

He had a rough sense of humour, not extending above the primitive jests of his class ; but beer, tobacco, other men, albeit welcomed by him and counted as right aids to enjoyment of living, were not his masters. He lived a life apart ; his own company sufficed him, and his days were curiously innocent in thought and deed for a creature with conscious intelligence. His existence appeared almost as healthy, natural, clean, as the life of an animal ; and this happened to him from the accident of temperament rather than any studied achievement of virtue. The activity of his mind justified his existence. An understanding man, he pursued his work thoroughly in all its branches ; and his labours threw him upon himself in a manner not uncommon amongst those whose duty lies upon the land through lonely weeks at the plough or in the forest. But whereas most who follow this life enjoy little light and exist within a mental vacuity, like bird or beast, Nicholas possessed the power of observation. His work had taught him to be curious ; his habit of thought and a touch of primitive imagination did the rest, and sufficed to render him interesting.

The man was not lonely, for he believed the New Testament, and its message glowed and burned within him, even as its story peopled his nights and days with solemn figures that seemed proper to that waste.

In such scenes as these, much of the gospel narrative might actually have passed; and Edgecombe's share of fancy herein found an outlet, his essential quality of mind here led him to abstractions at once cheerful and beautiful. No irreverence sullied his musings, for the spirit he had revealed as a boy was carried into his manhood. When a child he lived in the old story; when a child he climbed a sycamore to feel as Zacchaeus felt; and once he broke a loaf and a few moor trout of his own catching, then dreamed of the miracle that turned such fare into food for a multitude. And now, as a man, like images still attended him. He moved along without any shadow of self-consciousness or self-abasement; he never probed his own soul; he approached his dreams in no mystical or religious spirit, but with a frank material interest; because it happened that the Bible was his sole source of mental activity and the only book he knew much about. His other literature was a treatise concerning the farrier's trade, and an obsolete work on forestry.

So the Christian Testament stood for Edgecombe's prime intellectual interest, and he accepted it in absolute faith and an objective spirit. He figured the Lord as tempted of Satan on Longaford Tor, imagined the fiend as sweeping away in a purple cloud shadow, fancied that the Saviour's robe without seam was shining afar off, when the sunlight touched some distant, upstanding menhir into likeness of a man. Amid such hills as these, where the desert spread, all scattered with great stones and lighted by desolate waters, Christ had prayed, fasted, suffered; under such ancient trees as existed here his Master's sweat had rained in blood; beside such a river the voice of the Father had once echoed like remote thunder, and the shining Spirit had fallen in shape of a dove, even as the blue pigeon still flashed oftentimes from the wood. Edgecombe descended into closest detail and followed the life of his Lord with a remarkable insistence upon the blanks of the evangelistic story. He pictured the

unrecorded years; he thought upon the labour of the hammer and chisel, and marvelled as to the manner of the workmanship. The nature of those articles that Christ's hand fashioned was a subject of inner speculation; he questioned whether miracle had entered into them, and experienced a sort of dumb wonder that wood, wrought to human ends by the hand of God, could perish. Then he suspected that no such thing might happen, that the least achievement of that divine craftsman still endured, still filled humble uses in cottage homes—its immortality unguessed by the generations of man. Edgecombe often conceived of Christ as physically weary, and when he drank of the little icy springs, where they bubbled from sphagnum beds upon the hills, he doubted not but that Jesus had similarly quenched thirst. He enjoyed also to partake of such meat and drink as was specially named among the simple portions of the Lord; therefore honey and fish and bread were agreeable to him, although he held them less useful than meat to repair his own great body. He likewise much desired some day that he might taste wine, because it had passed the Saviour's palate.

Beyond this child-like materialism Nicholas Edgecombe's mind extended but little; yet unconsciously the keeper rose to higher things at a point, and searched the scriptures for all Christ's relations with life, that he might find how far it was possible to trace his own experiences as sustained and undergone by this supreme guide. He took his humble problems and new facts of life to the record, and read and re-read it before each novelty that existence opened to him. And thus almost directly he came to a reasonable estimate of essentials, and learned to measure men by the worth of their aims. Of the Christianity of churches he knew nothing; of the sacerdotal structure, lifted to its present altitudes through centuries of human ineptitude and human craft, he was profoundly unaware. The machinery of the sacraments and kindred conceits he had not discovered in the record, and those passages

that gave him pause were, often enough, such as research has proved political interpolations. For the rest he took the story in its entirety, and gazed thereon clear-eyed by the accident of his ignorance and abstracted life. The dust and din of dogma could not obstruct his vision; the bitterness of sects had never shaken his charity; futile dialectics had neither wearied his hope nor clouded his faith. Morbid he was not, for he took himself and his behaviour without the least uneasiness. Such an idea as spiritual progress had not occurred to him, and he never plucked his conduct up by the roots, mourned a lapse, or congratulated his soul on a day well spent. Work he enjoyed as becomes a healthy mind; rectitude in detail was a natural habit with him. No honest man had ever quarrelled with the keeper, and, misled by this fact, Nicholas entertained a very liberal opinion of his kind. He lived in the heart of Nature with sun and moon for his companions, the wind and the river, the old wood and the mist for his nearest neighbours. These things brought their good to him. Spring and summer found his toil relaxed and no little leisure upon his hands; autumn and winter brought the tonic of hard work and bitter weather; but, in all the physical splendour of sound breeding and thirty healthy years, he triumphed. He knew no ache of mind or limb, and with a wide content, still following the present, faced all that life might hide without impatience to anticipate an hour. As yet the criterion of faith's value awaited him: those tests that practice alone can furnish. And, lastly, Edgecombe was ignorant of the power of his environment, of its forces now prepared to work upon his spirit. He knew not that sometimes "great things are done when men and mountains meet."

CHAPTER II

A PUFF OF SMOKE

NO fence or barrier stood between Edgecombe's cabin and the surrounding moors. His dwelling sprang directly from the waste, as did the rocks and the trees—a sudden scrap of civilisation incongruous to the artist, attractive to the wanderer of thoughtful mind.

As became a man who must of necessity do woman's work and his own, Nicholas Edgecombe was to some extent methodical, finding that his comfort depended upon it. He cooked his food; he mended his clothes; he washed his scanty linen and spread it upon the furze bushes to dry. His home indeed presented chaos to a chance visitor, but the master knew where instantly to find a needed thing. His house was divided into two equal parts by a wall of match-boarding. The kitchen held a cooking-stove, a table and some chairs; the other chamber contained little more than a bed, a wash-hand stand and a glass for shaving. The dwelling-room was decked as to its walls with grocers' almanacs and some yellow and stained engravings of sacred history. For lack of mantel-tree Nicholas had nailed up a shelf to hold certain heirlooms. Here stood a silhouette of the warrener's grandfather and a wan daguerrotype of his parents, sitting stiffly together in Sunday raiment under a photographer's pedestal. Some scraps of old china were also disposed beside the pictures, and above them hung his father's gun—an ancient and obsolete muzzle-loader. The corners of the room were littered up with netting, boxes of ammunition, coils of copper wire and stout cord; with cooking utensils, crockery, boots and leggings, a fishing-rod, a battered creel and other concerns; while upon the table appeared a machine for

reloading cartridges, a box of fish-hooks and traces, straps, bottles of oil, gun-cleaners, rags, some dried rabbit-skins, ferret-muzzles, an old newspaper or two, a saucer full of musky otter-wedging—to prove for a doubting sportsman the presence of that beast on the river—and countless other contrivances and arts and appendages belonging to his trade. Without, against the wall, hung Edgecombe's larder: a wooden box with holes bored therein for ventilation; and hard by stood a ferret hutch, where lemon-coloured, snake-like creatures slept in rounded balls, or crept among their straw, and blinked out of weak pink eyes upon the world. A dog-kennel and a big black collie upon a chain beside it, alone remain to be mentioned.

Now the master of this abode looked at his watch and finding that the hour was noon, stopped work, rose up from among his red wires, entered his hut and cleared a corner of the table for dinner. In a spring of sweet water near the door he washed a tea cup and filled it; he then cut off the third part of a loaf and, with a fork and a spoon, dragged half a rabbit from a saucepan on a smouldering fire. The man nearly filled his dwelling, and bent instinctively where the roof beams, laden with various matters, crossed above his head.

He ate fast, according to the use of those whose food is taken alone, and he was just scraping his dish with bread, to save trouble of washing before the next meal, when the dog barked with a note of welcome and a young voice answered.

"Hallo, boy! Good lad—good Smiler—down then! Be your master here or not? Tell me that if you can."

Nicholas licked the last drop of gravy from his red moustache then called aloud through the open door.

"Come in, Teddy. You'm afore your time, however."

A lanky, half-grown youth of fifteen appeared, marched in and sat down on a biscuit-box by the threshold.

"I be tu soon, Nick," he said, "but down to the inn they told me as Mr Snow had given out you might be away for the day. But I didn't believe it like, so I reckoned to come and see for myself. I walked from

home over Bair Down an' I seed a braave fox in the clitters theer. So bold as a lion he was, and trotted off slow, an' looked back-along over his shoulder wi' his dog-teeth showing—just like Sorrow Scobhull's teeth do show when he swears. I lay that fox cussed me, 'cause he knawed I'd grow into a man an' be his master some day."

Nicholas laughed. He was finishing his dinner and now spoke with a mouth full of bread and cheese.

"I've seed un do the same many a time, an' lay he doan't cuss me worse'n I cuss him. Us'll see what Mr Fox have been at presently when we go round the runs. They'm near to humans for power of putting two an' two together. They know what my snares be for so well as you, an' they know I save 'em the trouble o' workin' for theerselves. So they just bide quiet, an' curl theer moustaches under the moon, an' talk theer fox talk together till—'squeal!' goes a caught rabbit. Then out they pops an' helps theerselves."

"You can't do nothin' against foxes."

"Not me. Man as would shoot a fox would pick a pocket by all accounts. My master, Mr Snow to Cross Ways Farm, doan't hunt hisself, but no better sportsman ever lived 'pon Dartymoor. 'Let all foxes bide whether or no,' he sez to me when first I come. 'Foxes was invented by God A'mighty to keep gentle-folks out of mischief,' he sez, 'an' us caan't have tu many of 'em.' That's his view."

The warrener laughed at this recollection and the boy, without entirely perceiving the jest, laughed also and watched his friend light a pipe.

Teddy Merle was the son of a widow woman who dwelt some miles distant, at Bray Farm, above Two Bridges, on the river Dart. His father had died ten years before; his mother pursued the business of the homestead, where its lean lands spread on the great uplifted bosom of Bair Down above the wooded glen of Cowsick. Here forest trees of comparatively recent planting fledged the hill with pine and beach and oak, and the grey farmhouse crowned the elevation, its fore-

ground of sloping hills and green valleys, its background the sky and huge hills that sloped and climbed gradually northward. Teddy was as yet too young to take a practical interest in his future occupation ; but he had a sister older than himself who was his mother's right hand. The home existed happily ruled by women, for ambition had passed out of it with Teddy's father, and the farmer's widow was content humbly to plod and pay. She left further development and enterprise to her son, when he should grow to be a man. He was a boy of good heart and affectionate nature but desultory purpose. He set no resolute face to his destiny, made no preparations to grapple with it. Instead he mooned along the by-ways and wakened only into enthusiasm over sporting. He avoided education as much as possible, but his better endowed sister had shamed him into some acquaintance with reading and writing.

His friendship with the warrener arose on this wise. Returning once to Wistman's Wood from the hamlet of Two Bridges, with his daily bread and a piece of fresh meat, Nicholas met a boy in a green moor gully between ridges of furze and ling. Clusters of little mounds dotted the grass, and undulations of the herbage indicated engineering of moles. Their hills were of the dark moorland soil, some freshly upturned, some, of older erection, weathered by rain. In the boy's hand was a round, sleek creature alive ; but observing its frantic struggles, noting that its snout was red with blood, and its paddle-like paws convulsively working in the agony of slow death, Nicholas stopped and asked the captor what he was about.

" I've caught a want, an' I be squeezin' the life out of un," answered Teddy, without shame.

" You cruel li'l devil—why for ? "

The boy's hold relaxed, and his victim fell panting, with most of its ribs broken. Teddy stared up out of dull eyes at the red man's anger.

" 'Tis a cure for warts what auld Granny Sage at

the 'Ring o' Bells' gived me. If you catches a want an' squeezes un with the hand what has got warts, till the blood comes out of his nose, the warts 'll go."

"You, a growed lad, to b'lieve such foolishness! I'm shamed for 'e. Theer's proper doctor's cures for warts, like all else. Stamp on that poor beast, an' put un out of his mortal pain this instant moment."

Teddy obeyed, slew the mole, and showed that this reproof had raised a thought and wakened a regret in his muddy mind.

"You reckon 'twas foolishness?"

"Ess fay! Never heard tell of no worse."

"You'm Mr Edgecombe of Wistman's Warren, ban't 'e?"

"I be."

"I'm Ted Merle, up to Bray Farm 'pon the hill over theer. Will 'e please to let me look at your butivul gun?"

"Welcome, if you'll never mangle live things no more. Every beast an' bird have got to die or be killed. But us as kills must do it decent. Cats an' such-like is taught to kill cruel, but men must kill kind—mind that."

Thus the friendship sprang, and now it stood at the duration of three months. Nicholas had already grown into Teddy's heroic ideal of a great man, and to-day the youth was come that he might go with Edgecombe over the warren, set a few hundred of the copper nooses, and perhaps see something shot.

The time for trapping had arrived, and already a hundred of the two thousand rabbits that Wistman's Warren was expected annually to furnish were accounted for. Now Edgecombe loosed his dog, shouldered his gun, and set off, while Teddy bore a huge bundle of the snares and their stout pegs. They climbed eastward to the great ridges of the land, and here, immediately beneath them, cast in a semicircle upon the hill-side, extended an amphitheatre of stones piled and tumbled together in utmost confusion, stuffed with turf and heather, hidden under fern, opening into

miniature green valleys, hillocked with grass and bilberry and wild thyme, where appeared little uplifted pulpits for the elders of the furred people. The harmonious mass of the warren was riddled with holes and tunnels, secret nurseries and homes. A dozen scuts twinkled white, a dozen brown shapes vanished to safety as the man and boy arrived above this great metropolis of coneys.

Edgecombe pointed to a solitary mountain-ash that rose from the midst with a ruined nest in its arms.

"'Twas a wise thought for auld carrion crow to put his nest theer. Gude sense for sartain—an' a hundred rabbits less for me if I'd let un bide. So busy he was—him an' his missus! I felt most sorry, but theer ban't no law to cherish crows, same as foxes. I shot the pair of 'em after their eggs was laid; an' them eggs I had for breakfast. So a man be wiser'n a bird for all its wisdom."

Teddy's eyes were upon the lofty and grass-grown wastes above the warren. There, in the herbage, a skilled eye might mark most delicate networks woven by soft paws pattering hither and thither by night. These faint rabbit ways wound everywhere, crossed and recrossed, diverged, mingled and forked again in endless reticulations upon the hills. And within them, set at a fatal hand's breadth above the ground, there glittered the red wires.

"A gude few be drawed," said Teddy, as he pointed to sundry traps dragged flat from the peg.

"'Tis the sheep. They worrit my life out of me sometimes. Often an' often I catch 'em with the traps upon their feet."

Fifty yards distant a captive crouched, vainly trying to escape observation. Teddy was excited and rushed forward, but Edgecombe bade him leave the rabbit alone. Approaching, he picked up the creature softly, lowered its head between his knees, and in a second, with one deft act, dislocated its neck.

"Best an' shortest way," he said. "Always mind that. Us never shoots 'em, 'cause it lowers their price

for market ; but slip the neck-bones, same as I done then, and they be so dead as a stone 'fore you can draw a breath. I hope I'll die so easy come my turn."

They proceeded, while Nicholas reset the "drawn" wires and placed others according to his judgment as the sun showed him the faint runs patted in the grass.

A second snare held only the hind quarters of a rabbit.

"That baggered auld fox again!" cried Teddy, and the warrener nodded.

"Ess; an' I knaw wheer my gentleman lives, too. Rest of thicky rabbit be under the waistcoats of five fat cubs in White Tor by now. I seed 'em at dawn a week since—rolling about and biting each other's brushes, like a litter o' kittens. You'd have laughed. Anyways I did; an' the little varmint's heard me, an' cocked theer small noses an' was gone, head over tail, into the caverns of the rocks, quicker'n a streak o' light. I doan't grudge 'em a rabbit here an' theer, come to think of it, for October's nigh, an' the twoads will be running for dear life from the young hounds afore they'm much aulder."

About the hills, like giants' graves, stretched a few artificial burrows, built for enticement of the rabbits. Nicholas, however, held them in no esteem. They were the work of those who had toiled here before his time, but experience proved them futile.

"Downlong, they serve theer end," explained the warrener to Teddy. "When theer's little natural cover, rabbits may be tempted to gude homes in the dry; but 'twas a fool's job to waste sweat that way here. What they ax for is——"

A circumstance most unexpected and most irregular brought the keeper's mind sharply to his duties and interrupted his speech. A mile away, on the vast slope of the hill and above those spacious gorges that spread into the valley, a gun fired. Here wound a tributary of Dart—Cherrybrook by name—and its course spread, inlaid with twinkling light, upon the deep bosom of the waste. Glimmering, and touched with the direct sun,

this streamlet passed where dying foliage of asphodel and withering sedges painted miles of bogland with umber and red. Then, beneath old ruins of a gunpowder factory and some dark growth of stunted firs, the river ran to Cross Ways Farm, where Edgecombe's master dwelt.

"A gun fired!" said Teddy.

"Ess, it did, an' now I know why Mr Snow gived out I might be off the warren to-day. 'Twas a trap to catch a thief. He's long misdoubted a certain chap; and here's proof I'm thinking, one as ought to know better tu. Come down under the sky-line else he'll see us."

They slipped quickly beneath the hill-crest upon that side from which the gun had fired. Then Nicholas got down behind a rock and told Teddy to do the same.

"I hope he haven't seen us," he said. "Keep your eyes open for the smoke, come he fires again."

"I lay 'tis Mr Oldreive from Cherrybrook Farm," ventured the boy.

"I lay 'tis; an' not first time he've been here. Sporting ban't gude enough for him onless he can spice it by sporting on other men's land.

"He'm awful wicked I've heard tell."

"He ban't gwaine to shoot my rabbits whether or no."

They waited and watched. Those were the days of black powder, and the smoke of an explosion might be seen at a great distance in such a region. Presently two little stabs of fire flashed far away. A puff of white smoke rose immediately, and long after it had rolled to windward, two thin sounds in sharp succession struck the keeper's ear.

"Fired both barrels a mile inside the warren wall," commented Edgecombe. "You can bear me witness to that, Ted Merle. Now you take my gun, for I shall have another to carry back, and just bide here where you are without moving till I come again. I may be an hour or two, or more. An' if I ban't back by dark, go to the cabin. Now I'm gwaine to creep down south

side of the boundary walls an' get in the marshes unseen. Then I'll come up an' cut him off."

"He'm terrible strong an' terrible swift they do say."

"If he'm stronger an' swifter than me, I'll forgive him," said Nicholas.

"But he've got a gun on his side," hazarded the cautious Teddy. "If he shoots, Nick? then you'll have the charge 'stead of the gun, an' that won't be none tu pleasant for 'e."

"He won't shoot, an' his gun will be under my arm afore dark, to say it without boasting. Smiler, you bide theer!"

One word was enough for the dog, who had learned absolute obedience through the way of discipline. Smiler sank down where his master had pointed beside the boy, and lowered his muzzle to the ground with resignation.

Then Nicholas departed, slipped from stone to stone at a great pace, and presently reached a wall that cut the hillside, and descended towards the plains below. Over this the warrener climbed, and pursuing his way under cover of it, was seen no more.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMANDMENTS

REMOVED by nearly two miles from the stealthy keeper, a young man named Timothy Oldreive pursued his sport. He was well-knit and cast in cleaner mould than Edgecombe. Trim and agile, with certain traces of delicate breeding about him, he presented a mystery to the country side; and his course of life was such that prophets of evil found him a congenial theme and a picturesque text whereon to preach the ills of bad upbringing.

Timothy was an orphan and the owner of a small tenement farm upon the banks of Cherrybrook. His patrimony lay within a valley under Belaford Tor, where this stream ran. The river then passed beneath a moorland road between Two Bridges and Ashburton, and presently, dipping into a wild confusion of peat cuttings, flowed into Dart. The courage of Oldreive's grandfather, the perseverance of his father, had made Cherrybrook Farm a place of some account. Saved from ruin by their energies, the reclaimed land was now of high quality for that region, and yielded annual hay and roots nearly sufficient for the keep of the stock in winter. The farm enjoyed Rights of Venville—those immemorial privileges of moor-men that may be traced beyond Norman times, and by which dwellers within the Forest of Dartmoor and its precincts are permitted to take all manner of things from the land that may do them good, "excepting only vert and venison."

Now Oldreive dwelt with a hind or two at Cherrybrook, and his parents rested from their labours. There was a story against his mother that accounted for the young man's distinctions and peculiarities, though this rumour had slept but for the life that Timothy led.

He indeed revived it by his own manner of conduct, while tale-bearers and such as loved to sow scandal, saw further proof of their story in Tim's own handsome face and delicate features. Despite a good education and careful home training, he lived dissolutely and defied convention. He was a lazy youth, loathed spade and plough, and watched the hard-won successes of his ancestors fade yearly away. For the money saved by Jacob Oldreive now went no longer to fight the eternal battle waged by every moor farmer against his environment. Timothy starved Cherrybrook Farm, and the fruits of starvation—heather and thistle, brake-fern and furze—soon leapt the stone ramparts of the fields and returned triumphantly to their ancient abodes. Short-sighted, careless, vicious, Timothy Oldreive cared nothing for the means by which he must live in the future while certain funds of his father's earning still remained to him. Money that had been better spent in purchase of lime went to buy trinkets for a girl at Plymouth; but when anbury struck his turnips and they forked by the thousand and turned into distorted failure, he cursed his luck instead of his folly according to the custom of such men; while, if his potatoes by good chance produced a notable crop, instead of waiting the spring markets, he would sell at a few shillings a sack before Christmas, because the shadow always bulked something larger than the substance upon his eyes, and because patience and prudence were a sort of gifts he specially lacked.

To sport the young man dedicated his life, and he fell back upon a town for his other amusements. He confounded pleasure with happiness in the manner of his class, lived hard, kept company of his own feather, was popular with the sportsmen, a laughing-stock or an object lesson among sensible men. At this moment, beyond the prime interest of shooting and fishing for salmon, Oldreive's pleasure centred in a woman. He was philandering with the daughter of the innkeeper at Two Bridges and spent much time within the bar of the "Ring o' Bells," to the satisfaction of the hostess.

Now this man, while resting upon a rock, was suddenly surprised to see the big red head of Nicholas Edgecombe arise abruptly before his vision from behind a mass of granite within one hundred yards of him. He could perceive the warrener's grin even at that distance and watched him sourly as, abandoning further precautions, Nicholas stood upright after his successful stalk and rapidly approached the wrong-doer. But Timothy, before sitting down to smoke and drink, had taken the precaution to climb out of the warren, and at present he sat far beyond the boundary walls with six rabbits spread before him.

He had leisure to decide upon a course of action as the other came up, and his decision was characteristic. He brought out his pipe and his flask, then, while Edgecombe was yet scarcely within speaking range, Timothy sang out in cheerful voice.

"Have a drink, keeper!"

But Edgecombe did not answer until he arrived and stood beside the sportsman, and, looking down calmly, saw a thin, strong and narrow face uplifted. Timothy was hot and his black hair stuck lank across a splendid forehead. There were ugly bulging lines under his eyes. His skin was a dark, clear brown; his handsome mouth and full lips were half hidden in a black moustache; only a nose too fleshy and pugnacious, ruined the fine cast of his features and marked his mother in him. He looked up with a frank and pleasant expression, unscrewed the stopper from his flask and waited for Edgecombe to speak.

But the keeper's eyes were on the rabbits. He too manifested perfect good temper and indifference.

"One, two, dree, four, five, six—an' all full grawed!" he said. "That's nine bob, Mr Oldreive, for so you be, I suppose."

"Nine shillings from your point of view, no doubt. But I shoot for sport, not for market. You can have a brace if you like—and a drop of whisky, too."

"I want the lot," said Nicholas, calmly, "an' I want your gun likewise. You'm poachin' an' you know it

very well. You thought I wasn't 'pon the warren to-day an' reckoned theer would be more salt in sportin' if you added thievin' to it."

"Who the devil are you talking to?" flamed out Oldreive, with great simulation of astonishment and anger. "'Poaching'! I could summon you for libel, an' I've a good mind to do it. A clod like you, come from God knows what workhouse, to talk to a well-known man like me that way! Isn't that the wall of your warren? And aren't there as many rabbits and perhaps more this side of it than the other? 'My gun'! I like your infernal cheek!"

"A bold chap an' a gert talker you be seemingly," answered Edgecombe; "but me an' another seed 'e fire an hour ago, and a mile inside the walls tu. I've been watching your sport very close this longful time. So ban't no use your talking big. An' I doan't come from no workhouse neither but of honest parents, which is more——"

He was about to sneer at the other's descent but abstained and made an end.

"So I'll take your gun, if you please."

Oldreive hesitated; then finding that a high hand would not serve him and marking the keeper as a man of more powerful frame than himself, changed his tone and tried guile.

"Well, well, we ought to be friends," he said, "for I hear you're the best shot we've had on this side of the moor for many a day, and can be backed against me. So you must be pretty hot, for I'm bad to beat. Have a drink, and let us understand each other."

Timothy drank himself, then poured out a full measure and held it to the keeper. But Edgecombe shook his head.

"No gude that talk," he answered. "Very pleased to shoot against you any day when this be cleared an' you've got your gun again."

He stretched out his hand, but the other snatched his weapon from where it lay beside him.

"Keep off, damn you!" shouted Timothy, whereat Edgecombe grinned upon him and made answer,

"You can't. You'd wish to damn honest folk, no doubt, for the likes of you be amazin' generous wi' hell-fire for other people. Awnly one man can damn a chap, however, an' that's a chap's self. Might be worth your while to know that perhaps."

"You're a psalm-singer then," sneered Timothy. "Glad to find that out, for there's always a chance of getting round your sort. Will half a sovereign shut your mouth, or must you have more? It's a question of cash, no doubt."

"No psalm-singer me," said Edgecombe. "Us won't talk 'bout that. I want your gun."

"Well, these rabbits first. You won't sell them? Then give them to me. They are useless to you."

"Ban't mine to give."

"You're in charge of them, aren't you?"

"Ess—I'm in charge of them, an' the warren, an' Nicholas Edgecombe."

He grinned again at this view of the situation.

"That's yourself," said Timothy.

"Just so. A big thing to be in charge of a grawed man wi' a sawl to be saved."

"You're a canting water-drinker, I see. I'll leave you, or you'll spit all the ten commandments at me and preach a sermon afterwards. Keep your blasted rabbits, and count me your enemy from to-day."

The young man rose with affectation of great haughtiness, but Edgecombe was not impressed.

"Bide a bit," he said. "You'll not go yet. You're a hatch-mouthed, vain fellow, and I'm sorry to see such foolishness in a chap turned your years. As to the ten commandments—since you know theer be ten—'twill be news to you that folks say you've broke the lot. Now you shall hear 'em, whether you will or no—every jack one of 'em. Ban't awften anybody gets you in a corner an' makes you listen to sense."

Timothy stared.

"My God—a preaching gamekeeper!" he said, and the other laughed genially.

"Well, us never knaws what us may come to. Anyway you've got to listen—me being the heavier an' stronger man. So you'd best to sit down again an' smoke your pipe an' take it calm."

"You shall smart for this."

"Sit down, or I'll knock 'e down."

Very slowly, and with appreciative chuckles, Edgecombe repeated the Commandments, with his eyes on the poacher.

"A wonnerful various lot," he concluded; "an' such as they be you've scat 'em all, Timothy Oldreive—'cept seventh, as be out of the reach of a bachelor man, I s'pose. Honour your God you doan't, else you wouldn't kill fish 'pon Lard's Day; an' honour your parents you doan't, else you wouldn't let Cherrybrook Farm all go to rack an' ruin; an' theer's eighth Commandment gone to the tune o' six rabbits. You've lied against your neighbour, an' will again when you tell this story down to the 'Ring o' Bells'; an' you've coveted your neighbour's wife, as all Dartymoor knaws, including the woman herself. That leaves murder for 'e—well, you'm young yet."

The keeper laughed hugely upon this tremendous indictment, but, curiously enough, Oldreive's anger cooled as he listened, and now he reproved his reprovor. His dark eyes clouded a moment; his lips parted; he looked far away, and passing pain of mind contracted his features.

"No laughing matter," he said, in a slow voice.

Then Edgecombe returned to gravity.

"No fay—I should judge it wasn't; an' you'm right to look glum, an' I'm wrong to laugh like a fule. God, He knows, I'm no better'n you—very likely worse. But the Holy Bible be a terror for showing up a man's own rotten sawl at every turn."

He broke off suddenly; for in the brief moment occupied by his words Oldreive's mood had changed. The shadow vanished, and a sudden desire to escape his enemy mastered him. Judging each motion aright,

and with wonderful celerity, he leapt to his feet, grasped his gun and fled. The whole series of actions occupied little more than two seconds, and with the moor before him and a great turn of speed, Timothy had doubtless evaded the keeper for that season; but fortune did not favour his effort. In the first unsteady rush, ere he could get into his stride, he tripped and came down, and before it was possible to rise, Edgecombe's hand had closed upon his collar.

Now the keeper's passing gravity vanished, and he was all smiles again.

"You'm out of luck," he said; "I should never have caught 'e if you'd awnly got up full steam, for you could run round me by the look of you. But 'tis my day, seemin'ly. Now, your gun, wi' no more talk—Bible or otherwise—else I'll take it."

He had suffered Oldreive to rise, and now, in a red-hot passion at this second defeat, the younger made his answer in deeds, for he clubbed his gun and rushed at Nicholas.

"Take it, then!" he cried.

But Edgecombe escaped by leaping to meet his foe and getting inside the danger. He gripped the other round the body, and Oldreive found himself powerless as a nut in nut-crackers. The great red poll of Nicholas, his wide mouth and grey eyes, were so close to Timothy's face that he had to squint to see them. Then he felt a tremendous hug tightening at his breast and knew that he must drop the gun or get his bones broken.

"Sixth Commandment still left for 'e," said the victor, "though you tried your level best to break it."

Then he picked up a pretty, hammerless gun, opened the breech, put the cartridges into his pocket, and took the weapon under his arm.

"Now get you gone," he said. "An' if you want this here, ax my master for it. 'Tis for him to decide whether you may have it again or not."

Oldreive breathed hard after his mauling.

"Wait, you great hulking brute—wait—that's all!

You shall wish you had never been born for this day's work. A common rabbit-catcher to dare to handle a gentleman!"

"Gentle is as gentle does," said Nicholas, returning for the rabbits. "I'd handle the Lard's anointed if they comed to steal my master's goods. If you set such store on yourself, mend your ways so as others can think well of you likewise. An' no call to fret your sawl wi' malice against me. I'm out o' your reach, I hope. Like's o' you ban't suffered to harm a honest man."

With this ingenuous assertion the keeper departed; and, while he strode down into the valley towards his master's farm, Oldreive climbed a hill to the west, crossed the great crown of Crockern Tor, and proceeded to the "Ring o' Bells," within sound of Dart.

Edgecombe marched to Cross Ways homestead, presented the gun and rabbits to Mr Snow, and told his tale. The old man listened with interest.

"Thought I'd catch my bold hero if I pretended you was away. A butivul fowling-piece sure enough. Did he rage against 'e?"

The farmer then heard his servant's story with much enjoyment, and Mrs Snow also listened.

"Gived un the Commandments! I lay they was so gude as a newspaper for surprises to him. Well, I could wish he was honest, for the poor chap, Jacob Oldreive, as thought himself his faither, was a very straight, sensible creature."

Mrs Snow spoke then. She was an aged woman with a masculine face whereon much history, mostly sad, seemed written.

"Give the young youth another chance, master," she said to her husband. "Theer's evil blood in him, and though it has shaped his limbs neat it have left his heart ugly. When the man's real faither died, he willed his body to hounds and his sawl to the Dowl, under his awn hand and seal. Such a parent be a terrible cruel thing for any lad to fight against."

"I'll yield up his gun then," said the farmer. "You

can take it over to Cherrybrook this evening, Nick, wi' my compliments. You can also say as I'll do nought against un this time, but that I hope an' trust he'll mend his manners and bide honest and a credit to Dartymoor henceforth."

But Nicholas shook his head.

"Best to tell him yourself, if you'll excuse my saying so. He've had gall from me already, an' I'm only a few years older than him. 'Tis bitterness to be bested by a common man like me, for a smart chap such as him, with his awn land an' all. If I go to un again, so smug an' proper, 'twill stiffen his back against plain dealing. But you, as be auld, belike he'd take advice from you."

Mrs Snow was of the same mind, and her husband, deferring to her from habit of years, promised to ride down the valley at an early day, that he might convey his pardon and return the gun in person.

"But, so like as not, he'll come here crying out for it before nightfall," he concluded.

Edgecombe then climbed the hill homewards, and presently stood under westering sunshine where he had left his friends. Smiler still sat as he was bidden, and even now moved no more than his tail in welcome; but Teddy Merle had fallen asleep, and he slumbered very comfortably beside the dog.

CHAPTER IV

THE "RING O' BELLS"

WHERE now stands the best hostelry on Dartmoor, at Two Bridges, nigh Princetown, there existed in the past a little tavern known as the "Ring o' Bells." It scarcely deserved the name of inn, and was indeed no more than a drinking-house for the moor-men and a place where horses might be baited upon their way. At the time of this story three generations of women ministered there: an ancient dame, her daughter, and her granddaughter. Gammer Sage had ceased to take much active share in the business of beer barrels, but she sat at the open hearth of the public room and was always to be seen in her lop-sided wicker chair by the ingle. Tradition declared that the peat fire in this chamber had never been out for thirty years, and Mrs Sage stoutly maintained the truth of it. The reek and din appeared to suit her well. She enjoyed the gossip of the folk there, and believed that, once bed-ridden and removed from the circulation of ideas, and the bustle and thick atmosphere of the bar parlour, she would fade away and quickly perish, as a flower robbed of food.

She was eighty-two, a little deaf, and at times abstracted. But the gammer had her good days; her memory continued clear, and her wide experience and kindness of heart made her an object of respect. Her wisdom was the wisdom of times past, and her lore dated back into the superstitious early years of the century. The old woman had a clear-cut, pale face, dim blue eyes, and good stock of hair that straggled in snow-white wisps from under her black cap. She sat for the most part in silence, and she enjoyed her

just fame as an authority on other days, as a storehouse and compendium of the history of a dead generation, its wisdom and folly, its failures and triumphs, its imprints upon time.

Behind the bar served Mrs Sage's daughter, Betty Bradridge, and her granddaughter, Hannah. Betty was a little grey woman, with a puckered face, a flat bosom and a long tongue. Her small eyes were humorous and shifty; her movements were brisk and decisive. She ruled the "Ring o' Bells" with a firm hand, and her neighbours suspected that Betty was a snug woman with good stores garnered, though, for her part, she cried poverty on every occasion. How this dame, so volatile, so lean, had got Hannah for a daughter surprised even the least inquisitive; but the maiden's father, a Bradridge of Buckfastleigh, quite accounted for her in Betty's judgment. Tall, full-blooded, with sleepy eyes and strong budding passions, Hannah resembled a choleric and handsome father, long since dead. Michael Bradridge, having burst a blood-vessel in a fit of rage with a horse, passed suddenly out of life and left his widow and only child to mourn him. Now Hannah had reached ripe twenty; and she was beautiful with the stately beauty of a class not called to labour.

The girl loved her mother, and did her duty at the inn. She clothed herself in print, and only asked to live her life in her own way. No special love of man had wakened her smouldering womanhood as yet, but she liked male company very well; she was generally ready for all mankind with a smile, half sleepy, half sly, and she regretted with a sort of lazy sorrow the necessity for refusing sundry well-meaning young fellows who from time to time, tranced by her great brown eyes, proposed marriage over the bar in quiet moments. Timothy Oldreive alone interested her, and she had perhaps gone further to meet his advances but for her mother's ill-judged pressure.

Mrs Bradridge, whose ambitions for Hannah were practical, first desired her daughter to go to Plymouth

as a barmaid at some great hostelry. In that capacity the girl's good looks might have won her a husband of substance—so Betty believed, but Hannah showed a different mind. Her strongest emotion and most enduring delight was her home. The mere mean habitation mattered nothing, but Dartmoor had grown to be a necessary circumstance to her well-being. Herein chance played her a kindly trick, for the girl was of a nature that cities had quickly spoiled. The tonic of this upland wilderness and desolation, its air, its purity, its severity and biting winter cold, now in her full flush of vigour and physical splendour, kept her soul and body sweet.

She was not intellectual, yet mind of a sort she possessed. Beauty of natural things she could understand after a dim fashion, and she only felt out of tune with her environment when the cold cracked her red lips and made her hands rough and painful. Hannah was good-tempered and short-tempered; she lacked her mother's sub-acid humour and quickness of perception, but her mental horizon stretched wider and embraced some æsthetic qualities inspired by the vague, huge attributes of the land she lived in. The girl loved her grandmother's stories of the old time before her. Indeed one who surveyed these three women had pronounced Hannah nearer akin in nature to Gammer Sage than her own parent. Though separated by sixty years, the ancient and the girl possessed some common imagination; and Betty Bradridge marked this circumstance. She often declared herself to be the active young woman and her daughter the middle-aged one. And this she repeated, with many such-like jests, designing thereby to laugh Hannah out of certain leisurely and desultory methods, in which she followed her duty and wasted her time.

"I'm the peart maiden in this house, an' you an' mother be the auld women," Betty would say. "If you make such a slow matter of your chores at twenty, Lord knows what kind of house you'll have come you be wife an' mother. A pig's wallow of a place 'twill be for sartain."

But Mrs Bradridge was awake to her daughter's charms, and now her mind had long been set on the farmer Oldreive as a likely son-in-law. Timothy proved a good customer, and she liked him despite his record.

Upon the day of this young man's downfall there sat in the parlour of the "Ring o' Bells" certain familiar persons.

Merryweather Chugg, the water-bailiff, lived in a cottage at Prince Hall, by Dart, a mile distant. His duties took him up and down the river, and he frequently found time to call at Two Bridges and quench his thirst. He was a big, grizzled man with a Roman nose, round shoulders, and honest eyes. Now he sat opposite Mrs Sage, partook of cold rum and water, and moralised between the sips; for Merryweather was a Wesleyan of sober mind, much given to improving the occasion. At that day there were rumours of wars, and he regretted them.

"If all mankind would only join hands an' get friends, what a rope 'twould be to pull the world up into heaven!" he said to Mrs Sage.

"Theer's a better, however, spun by the Lard," she answered.

"Faith be well, but works goes deeper if you ax me," declared the water-bailiff.

"Faith's more comforting," said a little, round-sided man. He was dirty and ragged; his features converged to the centre of his red face, and his eyes and nose and whiskers all tended like rays towards his mouth. A look of eternal surprise marked his expression. He was called Mark Trout, and he served as stableman at the "Ring o' Bells." This person lived at a cottage near the inn, with a wife and ten children. It kept him in continued and painful astonishment that the colony of Two Bridges did not appreciate his creative achievements at their proper worth; but, on the contrary, his neighbours treated him as a slight man and sympathised with his partner.

"Faith's very comforting, an' I thank God I've got it, for 'pon fifteen shillings a week you want it," he said, looking into space.

"You!" answered Mr Chugg, with scanty civility. "You ain't got faith enough to move a muck-heap, let alone a mountain. Who was it runned like fury from my dog but last July, 'cause he was frothing, an' you thought he was mad?"

"An' why for not?" asked Mr Trout. "The faith that waits on a high road for a mad dog's a fool. I thought he was mad, so for the argument he *was* mad."

"So you runned; an' that shows works be gerter than faith," declared the water-bailiff, with placid superiority.

His logic contented all save one. An odd-looking man, who drank beer in a corner by himself, lifted up his voice and raised objections. He was tall and weedy, with long arms and a strange, hatchet-jawed, mournful face. A thin black beard shrouded his chin, his hair was allowed to grow over his collar, his eyes were large and almost black. They rolled round, like those of a frightened horse. Sorrow Scobhull was sane, but the victim of one great, dominating dread. This imparted to him an eccentricity of mind and manner, and, as his appearance marked him sharply from his kind and suggested a man who moved through the world alone, so his brain, over-ridden by an idea, came gradually to part company with the usual interests of his class and brood in secret. Scobhull worked at breaking of stones upon the roads. His father had been drowned in Dart on the night of his birth, and he had come untimely to a frantic mother.

Now he spoke and differed from Merryweather Chugg.

"You'm speaking against the Holy Bible, bailiff, an' you'll come badly out of it. God's self never spoke plainer English. If you've got faith you'll be saved an' if you haven't you'll be damned."

Mr Chugg shifted his ground for this opponent.

"Ah, Sorrow, my dear sawl, theer's more in the Bible than that. Theer's a deal against witchcraft an' idolatry, as would do you a power of good to lay to

heart. You'm a heathen to your marrow when all's said, an' you imagine a vain thing an' go haunted by the river. You've got the fear o' Dart in your veins 'stead of the fear o' God. 'Tis a very dreadful thing an' I wish you'd change it."

"Dart's a devil, not a God at all," said the man Scobhull. "I knaw—I knaw—none better. I look down by the hour into that awful, crawling, sleek water, an' I see the eyes onderneath it—butivul snake's eyes—hungry eyes—allus waiting for the next."

Then Mark Trout, who had been pondering the water-bailiff's last remark to him and heard nothing of the intervening conversation, burst out with native pugnacity.

"I have got faith—oceans of it, an' I do believe everything I ought; an' if any man says I ban't a faithful servant of the Lard, I'll hit un on the jaw with this pewter pot, so now then!"

Merryweather Chugg regarded the stable-man with lofty scorn.

"If your faith ban't stouter than your temper, my son, 'tis very poor material against a strain. Work, I tell 'e, be the backbone of religion."

"An' theer's work for you, Trout," said Mrs Bradridge, "so best go 'an do it. Mr Myles Stapledon from Chagford have just ridden into the yard, so pack off an' see to un."

Trout departed with a final shot.

"I'll hold out for faith against the Lard Bishop," he declared; "an' the man who sez I doan't earn more'n my fifteen shilling a week be a liar."

It was at this juncture that Timothy Oldreive, smarting from his disgrace, entered the bar of the "Ring o' Bells." Scobhull and one Albert Axworthy, a labourer at Bray Farm, touched their hats to him; Mr Chugg, an independent man who bore no respect to the young farmer, did not salute. Oldreive, however, had no eye for comity in company. He was bursting with his wrongs and now cried them aloud to all listeners.

"Some brandy, Miss Bradridge, please," he said to Hannah; "and I want it, I can tell you. What do you think of a highwayman on the moor—a robber who gets me in a corner and steals my gun? The huge brute would have made two of me. I couldn't fight the clown, but I had a very good mind to shoot him. There will be a day of reckoning though, and soon too."

Oldreive then related his story in a manner highly picturesque but differing from the facts.

"That red chap up to the warren! Well, well; an' you so innocent as the babe unborn I'll lay my life," said Betty Bradridge.

"I should think so. He met me half a mile outside the warren walls, then swore he'd seen me shooting inside them."

"He'm a wise an' a harmless man all the same," said Chugg judiciously; "an' from what I've seed of him, I'd wager his eyes ban't often wrong at a mile."

Oldreive retorted with frank insult.

"Oh, you're against me, of course. 'Twould be a different story if I asked you to come and gaff my salmon at half-a-crown a fish."

The taunt, however, did not anger Merryweather.

"Not so," he said. "I'd wish myself a better job than to be your servant. One side of a story's only gude till us hears t'other; 'an, you see, poaching ban't ezacally a new craft to you, hoping you'll pardon my plain speech. Nicholas Edgecombe may be in the right of it, an' perhaps you mistook one side the wall for the opposite."

"You shouldn't be so quick to think evil, Chugg," said Betty Bradridge. "Six fine rabbits tu! 'Tis flat robbery I call it."

"So 'tis for sartain," declared Axworthy. "A coorous customer that Edgecombe," he continued. "Civil spoken, I grant, but close as wax; an' you might so soon ax him for his right hand as a rabbit."

"Close—eh?" fumed Oldreive. "Then, mark me, there'll be nothing hid of him long. If a man harms me, he pays for it. It may be soon, or it may be late,

but he pays. You hear what I say, Mrs Bradridge : I'll lay bare that damned coney-catcher yet ; I'll strip his secrets out of him ; I'll make him sorry for the day he fell across me."

Old Mrs Sage shook her head but did not speak ; and Betty, from behind the counter, applauded her angry customer.

" You'm most high-spirited, I'm sure," she said ; " but Edgecombe's only a lout. I shouldn't have nothing more to do with the likes of him. Of course you'll get your gun again from his master."

A horse trotted away with a tall man upon it. Then Mr Trout returned, and being a dogged soul in argument, with fine contempt for any necessary parenthesis or lapse, resumed upon the subject of his doubtful faith without regard for the present interests of the company. He handed a piece of money over the bar to Mrs Bradridge, then turned to Chugg and spoke.

" If works be fust, how about they lilies, so bold as Solomon, that toil not neither do they spin? Got 'e there, I reckon !"

" Lilies," said Mr Chugg. " An' what's the end of 'em for all theer brave blowing? They be cast in the burning, fiery furnace. They doan't do half the solid gude in the world as honest meadow grass. The fiery furnace, my son ; an' see you doan't scorch for it yourself. Faith won't get no man into glory if he goes empty-handed ; an' theer's an end of the matter."

Timothy Oldreive spoke to Hannah.

" Blessed if you're not turning into a regular nest of Methodists here. That red rascal preached to me just now—then stole my gun ; and here's half the parish boozing and talking parson's drivel. Better turn the ' Ring o' Bells ' into a chapel an' let nobody stomach a drink without he stomachs a sermon too. But sporting men won't stand it—as you'll jolly soon find."

Mrs Bradridge looked very uneasy.

" 'Twill give the house a bad name for sartain," murmured Albert Axworthy ; but he did not dare to catch Mr Chugg's eyes.

"Theer's many subjects as didn't ought to come up in a bar—I know that very well," said Betty.

"An' hell be one of 'em, no doubt," answered the water-bailiff, rising to depart. "Though whether 'tis better named solemn an' serious same as I name it, or in crooked language to clinch a curse, I'll let any wise man judge. But this I'll say in company, it doan't become Timothy Oldreive to sneer at his betters; it doan't become a rip like him, with a child got wrong side the blanket an' a name as be vinegar to a honest family, to dare lift his voice against clean men an' the fear of evil."

"Same old, worn-out lies," answered Oldreive. "I'm sick of 'em. You should be ashamed to speak them out here before women. Go to your work, old man, and mind your own business, else I'll tell your masters that you are a fraud."

Mr Trout here thrust himself into the contention before Chugg could answer.

"No lie at all, but the truth, Timothy Oldreive," he said, and his red face glowed. "If gude works save, bad works do the other thing; an' glad I be you'll win your deserts sooner or late. A child wrong side the blanket's a fact an' no lie, for they'm my wife's awn relations, an' the girl—theer! we knaws. You to talk, with your wasted life an' wicked discourse!"

Oldreive regarded the fierce little man with cold malignity.

"One wrong side the blanket is better than ten right side, you fat fool," he retorted. "You to dare to speak to a sane man! What are you doing but breeding and starving pauper brats that will waste good wood to bury 'em? Go and hide yourself in the workhouse—that's all you and your spawn have got to hope for."

Mr Trout glared back, but he was speechless. The sting and bitterness of the speech silenced everybody. Only Betty Bradridge laughed at the stableman's discomfiture, as the ostler went straight out of the bar without a word. At the door he lifted his fist, shook it, and disappeared.

"Another enemy for 'e—a life-long enemy, with the will to hurt if not the power," said Mr Chugg to Oldreive.

Then he and Scobhull walked away together, and Axworthy soon followed them. Mrs Sage sank into placid sleep after this scene, and a tortoise-shell cat by the fire, waiting only for her cap to nod forward as a signal of safety, crept up into her lap to be out of the draught. Hannah remained in the bar talking to Timothy Oldreive, while her mother departed to the kitchen.

"I know you are on my side at least, Miss Bradridge," said the young man; and she answered that it was so.

No other customer called Hannah "Miss Bradridge" save the master of Cherrybrook Farm, and she appreciated the compliment, and held it a mark of breeding in him. As to her general opinions concerning Timothy, convention did not much influence them. She thought the better of Tim in that his father had been a gentleman, nor did his own lapses particularly repel her. He had made it clear that he admired her; he had also discovered that Hannah was no maiden a man might play with. Her mother's keen eyes were seldom off her, and she knew her own value very well. Marriage was but a dim possibility as yet in Oldreive's mind—an advantage only borne in upon him when confronted by the chill of an empty home and cold hearth after long days of sport. But any thought of it usually vanished with morning light, and he talked of a housekeeper instead. He certainly had but little of worth to offer a woman, but that aspect of the question did not occur to him.

Friendship of a sort obtained between Hannah and Timothy. She waited with patient but sustained interest to see if it would ripen; he blew hot and cold according to his mood.

To-day he felt much in need of sympathy, and drank more brandy than usual, and squeezed the girl's hand and made her blush faintly.

"'Tis a great blessing for a poor, lonely beggar like me, who never hears a kind word spoken, to know you're on my side," he said. "The rest don't matter, but you're made of different clay; you've got a soul; you understand me. You can guess what it is to me to mix with such men, knowing I'm a cut above the best of 'em."

"I'm sure you are. 'Tis in your face and in your speech, Mr Oldreive."

"And in my head, too."

He looked fixedly at her until she dropped her eyes.

"We must have a stroll and a chat some day," he continued. "I want a real long talk about things with you."

She nodded without interest. Timothy in confidential moments always treated of that prospective walk. It remained for him to realise the excursion, for Hannah was ready and willing.

"I wish I could make you promise never to serve that warrener!" he burst out suddenly; "I hate to think he can get his liquor from your hand. He's no better than a wild beast."

The girl laughed and shook her head.

"Mother won't cut off a customer even for you, I reckon," she said. "He's a man so huge an' strong that he can drink a quart where a common chap's satisfied with a pint."

"Drunken brute!"

"For my part I've only seed un twice, an' once was in the dimpsy-light soon after he came."

"Hate him, hate him, because I do. My gun! That reminds me; I must tramp down to old Snow at Cross Ways to-night and get it back. Hate that man always! You must if you don't hate me. I'll not rest till I've turned his friends into enemies. Good-night, and thank you for all your kindness, Miss Bradridge."

CHAPTER V

ON DEVIL'S TOR

DESPITE the fact that his gun was returned to him when he demanded it, and that Mr Snow's reprimand was of the mildest description, Timothy Oldreive suffered a great vindictiveness to sway his spirit against the warrener. He nursed this temper until it grew, gained foul proportions, and quite poisoned a mind, for the most part ungoverned, but not unclean. The fresh air of his dwelling-place, and the tremendous and healthy physical activity of his life by no means served to dispel this fog. He was out of tune with all things by reason of a just rebuke. He lay in wait to do Edgecombe ill, and chance so ordered their future relations that, at a subsequent hour, when Timothy's purpose might have been thought accomplished, there arose new events to reawaken animosity, new realities to place his antagonism on a more substantial base.

A week after meeting with Nicholas by Wistman's Warren, the master of Cherrybrook Farm again came face to face with his enemy upon high moorland above Two Bridges. At noon, on a noble day of autumn, Timothy was returning homeward from a disappointment, and Edgecombe had just set out upon an enterprise. The younger man saw his foe far distant, and albeit the whole waste lay before him wherein to select his way, he yet chose to pass within a few yards of Nicholas that he might slight him if opportunity offered. The dog Smiler afforded such a chance. Like his master, the collie was a creature with simple trust in man, built upon foundations of his own experience. Now he fawned on Timothy, and was rewarded by two stinging blows from an ash sapling. Smiler

thereupon bristled, showed his teeth, and went to Edgcombe's heel with guttural protests long continued. As for Nicholas, his chin stuck out and his great mouth hardened ; but he kept his temper.

"'Twill larn you not to trust every chap in gaiters, my hero," he said to the dog ; then he accosted Timothy without any trace of anger, for he wanted information.

"Morning, Oldreive. I see you'm come from up-along. Can 'e tell me if you caught sight of they Scotch cattle as have roamed over our side of the moor of late from Okehampton way? The brown and black things be harmless ; but they tell me the white is savage. I be gwaine to Devil's Tor to teel a few o' my traps, for the clitters of rocks theer be full o' rabbits ; but I doan't want to run 'pon they beasts, for a man would have a poor outlook if they took it in their heads to go for him."

Oldreive laughed without much merriment.

"Afraid of cows ! I saw a few young red bullocks and heifers. I suppose they won't hurt you."

But a fire glowed in his eyes as he spoke and his heart throbbed fiercely. For he had lied. He knew well that a small herd of strange cattle had wandered southward of late from their lofty haunts on Yes Tor and High Willhays, the northern peaks of Dartmoor ; he knew that though wild they were also timid for the most part ; and he also knew that two white bulls were dangerous, and that a warning had already travelled round the district. Nor was this all. Timothy had now come from a little river valley beneath Devil's Tor. Here the infant Cowsick rolled in its brief passage beneath Bair Down ; and here, with a mind abstracted, the farmer, much to his own concern, had emerged suddenly over the hill-side close upon the wandering herd. The cattle fed here and there, and one white bull, a shaggy and rather small brute, grazed within a hundred yards of Timothy. Luckily the wind set from beast to man, and the bull did not observe Oldreive, but the farmer dropped down into the

heather instantly, and waited until the danger had roamed away behind Devil's Tor. Then he made speed in the opposite direction.

And now Timothy declared that he had not seen these animals; upon the spur of the moment he uttered his falsehood, then without more words passed on. Presently, when removed from the keeper by a hundred yards, he stood still and hesitated. He fought with himself; his better instinct, near atrophied, plucked life in this great moment and spoke no uncertain word. For all that he could tell he was sending his enemy to death. Yet he paltered with himself and argued. The element of danger appeared infinitely small, and the white bull, roaming as he fed, might by this time have passed a mile or more beyond Devil's Tor. Moreover, Edgecombe had a gun with him. At that thought his own affront leapt up in Timothy's heart and hardened it. Yet, what if harm overtook the man? Conscience painted something of the cloud that must darken Oldreive's days if such an accident befell; and herein conscience appealed to Timothy's selfishness rather than his honour. For he did not desire to be haunted by the spirit of a red warrener.

The farmer stopped therefore and turned, having traversed a hundred yards with his thoughts. Edgecombe had now proceeded full two hundred yards, and still strode rapidly forward. The sun shone very brilliantly, and at the upper end of the valley, above the mass of Crow Tor, where it rose above chaos, like some amorphous monster of old, barren moors under great light rolled upward to the northern horizon. There did Oldreive descry certain specks passing remote, and among them was a white one. He wasted some few seconds screwing up his eyes to focus the dot, but certainty was impossible at that distance. Then he regarded his retreating enemy again, and turned from one irresolution to another. Twice he put up his hands to shout; once he moved a few paces swiftly after Edgecombe. His life's history hinged on the flying moments and such was his ferment of doubt,

that one had almost suspected he felt it. In this storm of mingled motives he remained, until the other, walking rapidly, had passed nearly out of earshot; then he shouted twice—

“Edgecombe! Edgecombe!”

The wind blew contrary, and only Smiler heard. He put back his ears, stole a glance behind him, and growled to himself; but his master was none the wiser, and tramped onward.

“So be it,” said Oldreive, aloud; “no man can say I have not done the sportsman-like thing.”

Then he lifted his voice, and cursed himself and the keeper. He struck the stones about him, and raged in an active madness of anger and fury. From this spasm he relapsed into sullen gloom, and strove to smother inner thought with wild imprecations and great physical activity. He dashed forward, and leaped over many stones and furze bushes that barred his way. He dared his mind to torment him further. He quelled his manhood, as the tiger-tamer triumphs, by force of will. But such a process meant pain, and his spirit smarted for it, because Oldreive was still young, and his heart had only grown callous in patches. Ill at ease he went his way; then, with an effort, thrust Edgecombe to the back of his mind, that he might occupy thought with a new and personal grievance born of the morning.

Meanwhile the warrener pushed for that desolate elevation known as Devil's Tor, gaining which, he sat down with his face to the south and rested a while. The spot was singular, and the hill itself crowned with no irregular peaks and turrets of shattered stone like its neighbours. Instead, masses of flat granite covered it, like the dome of some huge bald skull thrust upward through the earth. Close at hand appeared a stone hero's most solitary grave, or the granite memorial of some forgotten form of God-worship. Here stood the Bair Down Man, a lofty menhir that wrote humanity upon the wilderness, and linked the lonely wayfarer with his kind. Edgecombe

was not aware that the pillar most probably indicated a place of burial. To him it served first as a landmark, next as an object to waken thoughts of his only book. The patriarchs set stones to commemorate great days and sudden joys. They raised altars where the angels had spoken with them, and piled up stones to testify that their God had dealt with them in visions and whispered His will in dreams. Of such enduring records and trophies this desert land possessed rich store. So Nicholas believed, for, in his judgment, the horrent ring of stones that marked a meeting-place—those uplifted fragments of unwrought rock that stood where the bygone people worshipped their spirits or buried their dead—were but scratches on earth's face to tell that here the "old men" had intercourse with heaven. Such fragments are familiar objects upon the Moor; they seem as ancient and are as stable as the hills that bear them; and of barrow and monolith alike it may be said in great words that "Time, which antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these minor monuments."

The huge Bair Down Man, visible for many miles against the sky-line, always woke a pleasant interest in Nicholas Edgecombe. Now, casting down his gun and his rabbit traps, he strolled to the stone, and walked round it, as was his wont upon the rare occasions of a visit. Suddenly his eyes were arrested by the granite. Cattle loved these uplifted posts, and often rubbed their coats against them. Red hairs not a few stuck to the lichened pillar; but there were others—white ones; and white being a colour most uncommon among the upland herds, Nicholas guessed at possible danger. Gazing sharply about him, he noted the shaggy strangers some two miles distant; but amid the rest, certain white objects were moving, and his distrust was allayed. He turned, therefore, sat upon the flat head of the tor, lighted his pipe, gazed awhile over the vast expanses of country spread before him, and then, going to his work, descended towards masses

of rock that formed a natural burrow, and began setting his wires in the rabbit tracks.

The crown of the hill now rose between Edgecombe and the birthplace of the little Cowsick river. Here was a water-torn region of deep channels cut in the peat, of deep gullies, morasses, and huge rush beds, where the streamlet shone in its many-coloured cradle of sphagna mosses, and twinkled away rapidly to gain volume and speed on its tumultuous course. Unseen by the worker, from these cool hidden places, snorting and snuffling, with his white legs miry to the knees and his coat also patched and defiled, came forth a white Scotch bull. He opened his red nostrils and strode with free gait to the crest of the hill, that he might snuff the air and learn the movements of his friends. A faithful cow waddled up out of the gully behind him, and the pair were about to roam away, where their companions passed towards the distant sources of Dart, when the bull saw Edgecombe's dog, and then observed the warrener himself. Whereupon he uttered a short note of exclamation, shook his head, and trotted quickly over the edge of the hill to look into the matter.

Smiler barked loudly ; the bull gave a shrill bellow, and Nicholas leapt up to face his peril. Too late he became aware of it, for the brute before him began to fret and paw ; then it put down its head, cocked its tail and thundered forward at a gallop. Edgecombe's first thought was the clitter of rocks beneath him, but no time sufficed to get to them. Therefore he ran a course at right angles to the approaching bull with purpose to get over the hill-top and into the water gullies at the other side. Once there it might be possible to dodge and clamber to some spot beyond his enemy's reach. In that frantic rush Nick thought of many things, but first of his gun, a hundred yards away on the top of the tor. Now the bull was upon him, but he doubled sharply at the critical moment, and the great creature, too heavy to turn, yet making mighty efforts to do so, crashed past and ploughed deep gashes in the turf as it drew up and renewed the chase. With

a gain of a dozen yards the man now fled behind his enemy, and then, reaching the edge of the hill, raced down at full speed for a sheltering hollow beneath. A straight run of seventy yards had taken him into one of the deep drains carved by storms and torrents out of the mountain side; but on open ground Edgecombe's progress was as nothing to the speed of an angry beast. With amazing quickness his foe recovered itself, and was now in full charge immediately behind him. An uncanny pertinacity marked this bull's onset, for Smiler did all a dog might do to distract the creature's attention and hinder its advance. But, holding on, the brute caught Edgecombe within five yards of his goal, lowered its head, and crashed into his rear.

Nicholas felt the tremendous impact beneath him, and, stalwart and heavy though he was, found himself lifted clean into the air, as a wave throws a cork. He turned a half somersault, and fell from a height of some feet into the trench that he had sought and so nearly gained. As he came down, there was a sharp crack, and, rolling over, he saw that his left foot was sticking out almost at a right angle with his leg. He felt no immediate pain, but the sight sickened him by reason of its jarring incongruity. He knew his leg must be broken, but he trusted that his life was saved.

The bull, looking round for its adversary, saw him not, and, having little logic, imagined that a single deed of prowess had annihilated the enemy. It shambled hither and thither, roared greatly, thrust at Smiler without success, then went its lordly way, nor guessed that its own hours were numbered.

CHAPTER VI

VIGIL

RECOVERING from his first faintness, Nicholas Edgcombe awoke into sharp agony of body and of mind. His physical sufferings were great, but they sank to nothing before the terrible concern that filled his heart when he considered his position. To appreciate the sufferer's alarm it must be remembered that he lay five miles from the nearest human habitation, his own empty cot by Wistman's Wood. Not once in a month did any human foot traverse Devil's Tor. Therefore death looked very near, and for a moment appeared almost certain. Removed after some moments from fear of immediate destruction, if the bull should discover him, Nicholas presently found it in his mind almost to regret his partial escape. Then hope returned; he painfully supported himself against the peat wall of the gully, straightened out his leg at full cost of pain, and, grown clear in mind once more, reviewed the chances of succour.

His dog crept beside him on its belly, wagged its tail, and licked his face. He knew that Smiler would stop with him or return home according to his command, but other orders were beyond the beast's comprehension. This matter, as possibly vital, grew into a great one, and the sun had sunk low into the west before Nicholas determined on action. He hoped that Smiler, roaming solitary around his home, might awaken suspicion if, by happy fortune, some friend from Two Bridges went that way. The chance of a visitor was remote, and until his continued absence wakened suspicion in his master, no regular search would be made for him. Even then such a hunt must probably be in vain, unless

his dog possessed sagacity to guide the seekers. In Edgecombe's own opinion dear life hung on the boy, Teddy Merle. He alone was likely to wander as far as the keeper's cabin; and in that event might meet Smiler, and be led by him.

Nicholas prayed that he might act wisely, and called upon the Lord to lighten his understanding, and tell him whether he should bid his dog depart or stay.

Then it seemed that his mind was informed, and he spoke.

"Get home, Smiler; get home!"

Smiler hesitated only a moment. Then he climbed up out of the drain, looked mournfully round, until the whites of his eyes showed, and so slouched off to the little spot dimly visible on the hills some miles away and far beneath.

Thereupon the stricken man tasted his first great experience, and entered upon a vigil whose duration none might foretell. From acute pain his broken limb dulled into numbness, and swelled enormously. Within reach of his hand was a tussock of rushes, and these he was able to cut down and strew beneath his leg. Happily water ran beside him. It twinkled regularly upon a drooping fringe of moss; then fell drop by drop to a hollow that it had worked in the peat.

Nicholas calculated that the water fell once in five seconds, and marked each drop swell and glitter. He took out his watch to time the little stream, but it had stopped, and the spring was broken. He mourned this accident greatly, for he was reduced to lonely misery, wherein even a ticking watch had been a companion. Time must drag the longer now that he could not tell it. The warrener had left home after an early meal, and he carried no food with him; but tobacco was in his pouch. He trusted that this might fortify him when he stood more in need of support, so postponed the great solace until morning should come again. Beneath the dripping water he placed a piece of sphagnum, and, when it was soaked through, sucked the moisture. As

the day waned, each feature of his narrow couch was stamped upon his mind in persistent characters, and every growth within that gully possessed for him a fascination evermore. Henceforth the green liver-worts that spread flat fingers on the peat, the small ferns hanging from cranny and crevice, the shining scraps of quartz, the rushes, and the ling that fringed the chocolate banks of his prison-house—all these, and lesser things also, turned his thoughts to that sojourn in the shadow of death.

The physical stress of his accident told presently upon Edgecombe's brain, and through long hours deadened all sense into a sort of drowsy torpor. Night came clear and bright, and the cold of it waking the sufferer's mind into activity, served to soothe a little the fever of his body. He mused as to how it must fare with him if a storm on the high moors sent heavy rain in torrents down these waterways; and he saw himself drowning by inches there. Then he believed that the Lord was sharing his watch; prayed with all his might; thanked God for sparing his life, and asked in great earnestness for further length of days.

The man often took a text with him into his working hours. Sometimes a passage read over-night would stir his heart more than common: and this he carried forward and bore along into the morning, through the hours of labour and the noontide span of rest. No special significance marked his selections. They were usually a simple statement of some event, an assertion or a beautiful fact in the life of his Master. "The common people heard him gladly," was such a fact; "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away," proclaimed a naked certainty, tremendous as the thunder, to his ear. "He healed all that were sick;" "He was moved with compassion;" "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"—of such were the words that seemed best to Nicholas Edgecombe; and he used them with no mental sobriety, as sayings to be weighed or applied, but rather as his

companions through long lonely hours, as glorious echoes of eternal good cheer. This day also he had carried certain words in his head, chosen for their ring and simplicity. He had read Paul's utterance to Timothy and remembered it. "I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." Now he strove to link them into the catastrophe of the day but failed to do so, save in a passing contentment that the apostle's fortune was better than his own.

As night deepened Nicholas passed into a sort of half unconscious delirium. In this painful semblance of sleep, tangles from Scriptural stories filled his brain and the pictures merged and swam together, limned and dislimned in wild dream scenery as phantasmagoria ill-focussed. Now he watched, now he participated; now he stood with the throng beside his Saviour; now he ate of the miraculous loaves and fishes; and now—as he moved and his broken bones tortured him—he was the lame man, laid daily at the gate of the temple, who asked alms of Peter and John. He saw the disciple and heard his words: "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk."

Starting, he wakened from his vision with agony, yet smiled up at the night in joy. For such a dream seemed of great promise and imaged his own fortune as he steadfastly believed. He too should rise presently and walk again by the mercy of heaven.

Night swept her train of planets above his up-turned face, and he watched the autumnal constellations steal westward as the earth rolled to the hidden sunrise. The stars twinkled suddenly over one edge of the gully, then crossed the strip of space revealed and vanished behind the other bank. So early in the evening the red splendour of Antares met his eyes, and overhead the gold of Vega passed. Later on Aquila's first star glittered and presently came another day on whose confines "grey dawn and the Pleiades before him danced." High above, like a veil of thin cloud, hung the infinite galaxy, where suns innumerable, their

account in sole keeping of God, lie sunk by awful distance to one wan, glimmering gauze of matter unrolled across the firmament.

The dark hours put on a face that he had not known until now, for never yet had he thus lain sleepless and in torment upon the Mother's damp bosom by night. She chilled his inactivity and brushed his face with her cold breath. Mist crowded over the hills before dawn, and the man's body suffered so terribly; his mind grew so sick and so weary, that there was no more flavour in thoughts of Christ, no further anodyne in dreams of heaven. Broken bones and torn flesh cried out and burnt; nerves suffered as though some invisible beast gnawed at them; the sponges of moss did not fill quickly enough to quench thirst; silence itself was a torment, inured to silence though the man had been. He thought of his dog roaming wretched about the cabin; and then his mind rested with a great longing on his home. Dismal, draughty, smoky and miserable as the little rooms had appeared to the eyes of anybody but himself, to him they shone in memory as a comely beacon and an abode comfortable and blessed beyond words. There lay all his earthly interests, and the only home he knew. He thought of his mean possessions one by one, and mourned that they must be scattered if he should not return to them.

Morning brought the sun and its eternal message of hope to Nicholas. The details of his resting-place slowly stole out of darkness, and he felt as each grass blade and stone took shape that they were part of his life, that he had known them always. The mist rolled away fringed with rose and gold; it waned and passed in shining flakes, and the sun, touching the eastern-facing peat, made it burn and glow. A little heath lark fluttered at hand, and Nicholas blessed the bird, because it was alive and could move where it willed. The gates of the morning were opened wide for entry of a glorious day, yet the man feared, much wondered how long the sun would take to traverse his bed, and hoped that clouds might be sent to obscure the naked

fierceness of its transit. For hours he had planned that when the fiery moment should come and perhaps bring some new torture, he would fall back upon his tobacco to help him through each added pang; but when soon after eleven in the morning the sun shone upon him, all thought of smoking had vanished, and his gorge rose at the idea. He shut his eyes and faced the light. Filtered through his opaque and blood-charged eyelids, the glare made one throbbing, featureless and scarlet world. In this his spirit roamed and seemed to lose itself. Then, summoning his senses, Edgecombe dragged his coat over his head — and waited. After it had looked upon him for nearly three-parts of an hour, the sun went onward and left Nicholas in the cool shadows of the peat again.

After noon there came a dismal whimper, and the black and tan head of Smiler peeped over the heather edge. A pair of eyes full of apologies met the man's, and Edgecombe's heart leapt, then quickly sank, for though he shouted with his best power, no answer came. The dog was alone, and, conscious of disobedience, crawled cautiously towards the fallen man, and cried as it approached. Finding no reprimand, and knowing very well that things were awry, Smiler sidled to his master, barked, licked Edgecombe's cheek, stood frantic amid doubts and distress of mind.

"Doan't 'e go no more," said the warrener, and his voice surprised him, for it had fallen into weakness. "Bide along wi' me, for you can't do no gude seemingly. You'm wild to serve me, but 'tis out of your power." He put his head on the dog and used it for a pillow, at which the beast showed uneasy happiness and remained motionless, save for his ears which cocked and fell. Thus silent ages passed by; then the dog, barking suddenly, awakened his master from sleep. Smiler twitched and trembled to be up and doing, and the sufferer, in a belief that the wild herd were again at hand, found fear of sudden death in his heart, though some hours earlier a quick end had been his desire. He held the dog back and listened. Then,

like thin bells heard far away, came a woman's laugh on the wind, and he knew, from the musical message, that his life had been given back to him. Therefore he loosed his hold upon the dog and gasped, and felt a sharp sting in his weary eyes. Smiler shot away like an arrow, and Nicholas shouted aloud.

"You maiden theer, get in the hollows quick an' keep out of sight, if theer's cattle nigh. They might hurt 'e!"

CHAPTER VII

HANNAH AND MARY

WHILE yet the sun scorched hope out of Nicholas Edgecombe and the day was young, two women set out from Bray Farm to gather whortleberries—called “hurts” in the vernacular.

But this excursion for the last crop of the wild fruit to be plucked that year, had a greater object than the berries themselves. Hannah Bradridge and Mary Merle departed in happy spirits to enjoy a holiday upon the high moor; and the heart of one held a secret from her friend, for Hannah counted upon an addition to the party and expected a man, who should presently by appointment meet her, in the deep glens through which the Cowsick brook ran from its fountains in the peat of Devil's Tor.

Accident, however, upset her hopes and Timothy Oldreive, who leapt at the opportunity offered, has already been seen returning in evil mood from his fruitless tramp. For he mistook the day and wandered to seek the young woman just four-and-twenty hours too soon. Then, returning to his home, he sulked in solitude rather than visit the “Ring o' Bells” and learn his error.

Now, as the girls moved along together and no figure cut the skyline above them, no voice shouted a greeting from the loneliness, it was Hannah's turn to feel regret and suffer a spirit of resentment. Mary knew nothing of her friend's secret chagrin but joyed with virgin pleasure in the fine weather and pleasant companionship. Teddy Merle's sister was like him: slightly built and strong. Her small eyes were grey, her bosom was a child's, her face looked plain yet not ill-featured in its

frill of sunbonnet, her fair hair was her only glory. A pleasant expression, telling of temperamental goodness, marked her countenance. She was a young woman fond of work, ready to enjoy or employ the passing hour, one who rarely, save in moments of solitude, looked beyond the duty at her right hand, or dreamed that time might presently bring personal happiness to her also and ameliorate the barren passage of her own hard youth.

They came where the whortleberries grew on a southern facing hill. The shrub clothed the whole earth here, and, from its undergrowth, granite boulders arose in wild confusion. So well did the fruit prosper that many acres seemed brushed with purple. Autumn light was upon the hills and in the mottled scarlet and gold of their dying foliage the ripe berries still hung profusely. Now Hannah plucked off three, then very gravely uttered certain words and performed actions proper to them as she pursued an ancient rite.

“The first I pick, I eat ;
The second I pick, I throw away ;
The third I pick, I put in my can.”

“There Molly, now us shall have good hurting.”

Mary laughed and fell to the wild fruit.

“How can ’e heed such nonsense? For I know you half believe all that your granny tells you.”

“Depends on my whim. We flits to an’ from, like a butterfly. Sometimes I take her sayings for gospel ; sometimes I believe nought.”

“You’m pixy-led now an’ again, I do think, Hannah. Of course a comely maid’s life be so full, compared to a plain one’s. The likes of me, wi’ moon-faces an’ no figures, have little to fall back upon to fill life but work. You’ve got men, an’ the certainty of a home, an’ hopes of childern in it.”

Hannah, who was the elder by a year, sat down beside a tuft of the purple harvest and began to pick and eat. As yet she had put none into her can save the solitary berry for good fortune.

"That shows how little you know about it, my dear," she said. "A round shape an' brown eyes don't bring you happiness. Four chaps have axed me to marry 'em since I was wife-old. Weern't a pleasant deed to say 'no, thank you' an' see them drop their silly jaws an' slink away as if 'twas vain to go on living any more."

"Right man'll come, however," prophesied Mary; and in reply the other woman's gaze roamed upon the hillside of Bair Down where Timothy might be expected to appear.

"I be a working bee, to say it without grumbling, I'm sure," continued the younger girl cheerfully. "There must be the workers, so well as the players."

"I work hard enough anyhow. You should hear my gran'mother 'pon that matter. For all her dreams an' old stories, she've got the sense of four-score years stored up in her. She reckons as most pretty women have to pay a price too heavy for their well-favoured outsides. They'm handicapped by it, for they never gets to larn the truth about men folk, no more than rich women do—not till too late that is. A man's never hisself faced wi' great beauty. He begins play-actin' an' pretending—same as he does afore his betters. You can hear it in the voice of 'em. They can't help it seemingly. Then another thing: brains an' beauty be strangers most always."

"You'm clever, an' so pretty as a picksher as well," declared Mary, but Hannah shook her head.

"Neither one nor 'tother. Gran'mother was the only maid in all Buckfastleigh both butivul an' wise when she was young—so she says. A maiden as knows that she'm fair trusts to it to win a happy life from it; but the chap that marries for a pretty face ban't the best fashion of husband. Often his love lasts just so long as her looks—often not so long; often he grows cranky before the gilt be off the gingerbread, because he finds he's got to live the rest of his life with a fool. But him as marries a plain piece o' goods does it because he've found something hidden there before he takes her; an'

if he'm clever enough to do that, an' cold enough not to put a lovely armful of woman afore everything else, he'll be well paid for his sense in the long run. All of which things my gran'mother have told me; an' I believe 'em."

"Sure that's very comfortin' for the likes of me, what be the same as a saucepan—for use, not show," laughed Mary; "but if you'm plain an' witless tu, 'tis a poor look out for 'e."

Hannah had lifted her eyes to the hills again. But only three black carrion crows met her sight. They croaked as they flew. She shook her head impatiently, then turned and began picking the whortleberries. Their work now interested both girls. They plucked steadily and wandered up the gorge.

Unknown to themselves each footstep took them nearer the spot where Edgecombe lay. They had traversed three miles; then Hannah abandoned hope of seeing Timothy, and the day grew something cloudy for her. Presently Mary cried out for food, and they sat down by the river to eat their bread and cheese.

"There's so good fish in the sea as ever came out of it," said Hannah Bradridge suddenly, thus answering her own thought as she scanned the hills once more.

"An' so good hurts on the bushes as was ever picked off. An' likely to stop there for all you'll do. What's the matter, Hannah? There's somethin' troubling 'e."

The other dreamed silently for a moment, then flung away her food.

"Ban't in an appetite for bread an' cheese. Eaten too many berries. Now I'll set to work steady an' fill my can."

Picking and prattling they moved upwards until the fruit began to wax poor on stony ground. Here berries were small and foliage was thin. Much of the latter flamed scarlet and shone upon the granite ridges that old time tin-streamers had left behind them.

"Us had best to turn back now," said Mary Merle. "'Tis all gashly bogs an' 'Dartmoor stables' beyond."

Hannah laughed, and at the sound a big dog leapt from a gully, barked, rushed towards her, and welcomed her with thanksgiving. Another moment would have seen both girls turn homeward; now, assured that the collie belonged to Oldreive, Hannah's heart leapt, and she walked forward with Mary beside her.

"I'll lay he's tired of waiting and we'll find him asleep," said Hannah to herself.

Then a voice mumbled out of the earth, fifty yards away it seemed; but the words of warning that Nicholas spoke were lost upon them until they approached him. Whereupon he called again.

"Get down in the drain an' keep out of sight of them rough cattle!" he shouted weakly.

But swift, alarmed glances showed no sign of danger, for the herd was far away on Rough Tor's breast. Then Hannah and Mary descended into the fissures of the waste and reached Nicholas. At sight of him the elder maiden stood still, with disappointment on her face. Instead of Timothy appeared a bigger man, with red hair and bristling chin, with wild eyes and massive limbs sprawled out in evident suffering.

"He'm ill, poor sawl!" cried Mary, and, going before, she hastened to Edgcombe's side.

"What's wrong with you, young man," she asked.

"Thank God for His gudeness—thank God!" answered Nicholas. "Whoever you be, you've saved a life. I've broke my leg—was horched by a gert white bull, as catched me an' throwed me down here. A year ago it seems almost."

"Thank God I'm sure," answered Mary. "You'm Mr Edgcombe, I reckon. You'm always on my brother's lips."

Then she turned quickly to Hannah.

"I can travel quicker'n what you can. I'll go down along so fast as I may, an' get men. You bide here an' see to un."

Before the other could answer Mary was off. She ran like a boy and had reached home again in little

more than half an hour. Within fifty minutes of her departure from the stricken warrener, Teddy Merle was galloping to Princetown for Doctor Light, while Trout, Axworthy, two other labourers and Mr Vosper, the head man at Bray Farm, had started with a hurdle to tramp to Devil's Tor. Mary led them; while at the farmhouse her mother prepared blankets and a bed in the parlour. It was clear that Edgecombe must be conveyed there for a time.

"Then, please God, when doctor have straightened his leg out an' splinted it, the chap can be carried off to Tavistock Infirmary an' no great expense overtake us," thought Mrs Merle.

Meantime Hannah did what was possible to lessen the physical misery of Nicholas; but he was now in a frame of mind so thankful that the tortures of his body scarce extracted from him a tightening of the forehead. The woman's soft hands and soft voice soothed him. He thanked her again and again for stopping with him; and he prayed her to keep a sharp watch upon the moor in fear that the white bull might pass that way. Nicholas then told Hannah all his adventure and thus, unwittingly, relieved her of a gloomy fear concerning the master of Cherrybrook. That Timothy had mistaken the day now seemed obvious.

But Edgecombe merely mentioned the other's name, and presently Hannah, forgetting young Oldreive, grew interested in the man stretched out before her. She had intelligence to perceive that the sufferer's patience under such a trial was remarkable. She could guess by the enormous swelling of his broken leg that he must have endured torments; and this fact, taken with his present cheerfulness, appealed to her. She liked his voice and was struck by the simplicity of his speech. He spoke of sacred things and rambled somewhat as though on the verge of incoherence. Then, with an effort, he fixed his thoughts again. He could not reach the boot on his wounded limb, but now Hannah cut the laces with a knife and relieved him.

"Who was that maiden along with you?" he asked. "I'm sure I pray to God to bless the pair of you—her so well as you. But you chose the harder part; to bide here alongside me. 'Tis so easy at a pinch to rush about."

"Mary Merle, darter of Mrs Merle to Bray Farm."

"I pray she'm quick of foot. Her brother goes like a hare."

"She'll run faster far than I could."

Nicholas looked at Hannah and realised her physical splendours.

"You'm built to queen it an' take life easy, I judge."

"Not me. I be Betty Bradridge's darter at the 'Ring o' Bells.' I served 'e with a pint of ale a while ago."

"Must have been in the dark then, or I should have minded your face. You'm very butivul for sartain."

He spoke as one uttering an accepted truth, but she blushed and he turned wearily away, not observing her emotion.

"Waiting be cruel for 'e, an' each minute like a month, no doubt," she said, in order to break the silence.

"'Tis nought now. I feel shamed even to sigh now. I should sing a psalm of joy an' gladness for this mighty deliverance. Only I be too light-headed to call home anything."

"You'm a Bible reader by the sound of you," she said; and he nodded.

"Do it comfort your empty life among the rabbits?"

He nodded again.

"So it should every life—full or empty—they say."

"For sartain," he assured her.

"I don't know. Look at they whey-faced chapel people."

"Can't say nothing 'bout chapels, nor churches neither," he answered, "but 'tis a comforting book to keep in the house, no matter where the house be."

"Us ban't very God-fearing in my family—except granny. She've made her peace and goes along very well content."

"Loose my neck, will 'e?" he asked.

Hannah obeyed, and her plump, berry-stained fingers pressed at the bone stud in his shirt. Collar he had none. He shut his eyes and kept them shut after one look into the face bent over him.

"The Lord bless you," he said.

Silence fell upon them again, and the girl felt a strange flutter of heart before this crushed and injured creature. Since her father died she had never seen great suffering or ministered to a soul. Now the woman in her rose, and she longed to lighten his pain, and busied herself with thoughts. Presently, while he seemed to sleep, she stole away and gathered dry heath and fern; then, lifting his arm that lay on a damp spot, she put the foliage beneath it.

Presently he opened his eyes.

"Be you hungry?" he said. "I hope not."

"Not me, but you might be," she answered.

"No, I couldn't eat nothing, thank you."

He shut his eyes again, and she looked closely at his face and admired his huge neck, curly red hair, and round ears. Then Hannah climbed from the gully and strained her sight away towards Two Bridges and Bray Farm. At last she descried a concourse of little dots moving together on the side of the Bair Down Tors, and hastened back and thought to waken Edgecombe with the good news, but changed her mind and let him remain in partial stupor. Walking then over the head of the hill hard by the menhir, the girl, like Nicholas before her, noticed white hair upon the lichened granite. Then she found the warrener's gun, removed the cartridges, and carefully rubbed the barrels, which were touched with rust. The tremendous weight of the weapon impressed her, and she mused with vague pleasure on the physical strength that could carry and wield such a gun without weariness. She marked the house of Nicholas where it stood, a spot beside the russet woods of Wistman far away; and she wondered what manner of establishment the man preserved there—how he cooked his food and kept his apparel in order.

Then came Trout, Axworthy, and others, with Jacob Vosper, who was a moor man of much common-sense, and Mrs Merle's right hand. Himself he had carried four feather pillows for this ordeal, and from his pocket stuck the black nose of a brandy bottle. Fortified with the spirit, cheered by the friendly faces, Edgecombe essayed to make light of his grief, and only mourned that so many neighbours should be put to trouble for him; but after a dose of brandy he lapsed into unconsciousness, wandered in his speech, and fitfully muttered fears of death, tags of prayers, and texts from Scripture. His words surprised those who bore him. They walked very slowly and with great care to avoid any wrench or jerk, while Mr Vosper went before and selected the road. Edgecombe was carried feet first, and Trout, with a hedge-tacker named Barker, walked in front, while Axworthy and one Wade followed at the head of the hurdle. From time to time the men changed hands, for Nicholas was a heavy load. Behind the labourers came Hannah and Mary, and they took it in turn to carry Edgecombe's gun.

"My arms do feel like they felt at your faither's burying, John Barker," growled Axworthy. "What with his weight of flesh an' the oak coffin, us had to change every quarter of a mile, an', even then, got our arms nearly tore from the shoulders before we reached the lych-gate."

Barker grinned with pride.

"Sixteen stone four he was in wraslin' togs; an' all solid beef an' bone. He could have took up this here man, big as he be, an' flinged un over his head."

"Yet only fifty-three—a double-chested chap, too, wi' lungs o' brass, you might have said," murmured the man Wade.

"He let a drop of rain dry on un—that was what done for un," explained the other.

Then Mr Vosper interrupted:—

"Go easy on your gert feet, Jan Barker," he said. "Every pang us gives the poor twoad now will mean a week longer away from his work."

Meanwhile in Mary's ear Hannah told of her vigil beside Edgecombe, and of the few words that had fallen from him during that period. But his frank declaration concerning herself she did not repeat. That the sufferer in his suffering could thus find eyes and words to see and declare her beauty touched Hannah's heart not a little. Words that had offended her if uttered by a man in health sounded differently in the mouth of one so sadly stricken. Here was admiration such as her experience had never known before, a tribute lifted above the littleness of flattery, a testimony wrung out in pain, yet sincere and artless as the song of a bird.

So they brought Nicholas to the haven of Bray Farm, and he had not been in the house above half-an-hour when Dr Light arrived from Princetown.

CHAPTER VIII

A RUNNING FLAME

WEEKS passed by before the warrener was in a condition to proceed to a hospital; and, by the time that he had recovered strength sufficient to endure the transit, any necessity for it was gone. Edgecombe's obligations to Mrs Merle and her daughter made him anxious to depart before Doctor Light allowed the journey; but, in the matter of his private inclination, Nicholas desired no such transplanting, for he found himself mighty comfortable, and in a happy land of kindness and new experiences. He was here with the companionship of women and the novel emotions they awakened; while, upon their side, Mary and her mother also found existence blossom with fresh interests. To the younger woman, life took a sudden loveliness at this advent, and roseal light touched her grey days; to the elder, Edgecombe's presence was not disagreeable when she found that his master's generosity was to pay expenses. Hannah Bradridge likewise displayed an interest in the sufferer that did not terminate with his convalescence; nor could an explanation of the misunderstanding with Timothy Oldreive serve entirely to drown her curiosity in the humbler man. Often she wandered up to Bray Farm, and carried some little dish of her own cooking with her; sometimes she sat with Nicholas for a while; and she was not oblivious of his simple thanksgivings that he yet lived, or of his assurances that she had saved his life. This debt he magnified by repetition, until it came to be a settled factor in their friendship.

With a broken leg and first love of woman, Edgecombe now strove. From the physical hurt he made

fine recovery ; from his heart-whole worship of Hannah Bradridge there was neither recovery nor escape. He grew uneasy when he reflected upon his equipment for such an enterprise, upon his little lonely den by the wood, upon his weekly wages of one pound. He had nothing to offer that was worthy of a woman—least of all such a woman as this.

Gratitude kept Nicholas actively sensible of his other obligations. He never wearied in his thanks to Mary Merle, to her mother, and to Teddy, who proved an invaluable sick nurse for his hero ; yet, as he returned to health, all mankind and womankind, save one, sank again into life's usual setting of shadows. They were as a background for the solitary, superb figure of Hannah ; they were kindly ghosts removed from him as far as spirit is from flesh. Only she, with her brown eyes and brown hair and great gift of silence, stood at the door of the man's virgin heart, and knocked there. Those wonderful silences were part of her, Nicholas supposed. He, who had lived his life alone, knew the precious virtue of such intervals. They added beauty to her voice when she spoke ; they intensified the glory of each fragrant moment while she sat beside his bed ; they were won from the high moor and the cloud shadows and the life of the wilderness that she loved and confessed to loving. Hannah could dream in daylight ; and when she did so, Nicholas, from his pillow, would watch her face, and try to read her thoughts. Mary Merle, on the contrary, lacked such large repose. Her life held no pauses seen by others. She read to the injured one, talked to him, brought him food, patted his pillow, daily renewed a flower in a jam pot beside him, filled every moment of their constant intercourse with bustle of action and of speech. She was bright as a star, bubbled with laughter, laboured with success to lift Nicholas above the passing depressions of his thoughts, and accepted without visible emotion his repeated thanks and gratitude. She too had her silences and secret dreams, but no eye saw them. She studied Nicholas himself more

closely than Hannah did, and she perceived that he was much caught away in thought, much given to reverie. Never having met him before his accident, she supposed that these abstractions were not new to Edgecombe; but the reason of them was beyond her divination, for, as yet, the girl could not guess that five minutes with Hannah were more to the man than a day in company of any other being. A text in the eighty-fourth Psalm had special application with the warrener henceforth, and he remembered it for ever after the morning that Mary read it to him aloud upon the sixteenth of the month: "For one day in Thy courts is better than a thousand."

Visitors Edgecombe had, and among the first his master, Farmer Snow of Cross Ways. This good man sorrowed at his servant's downfall, and, having a personal liking for Nicholas, relieved the keeper's mind of immediate anxieties connected with his work. He appointed a temporary trapper on Wistman's Warren, and promised Edgecombe that he should return to his cot and his labour when strong enough to do so. A fortnight later, the farmer's wife called with the good news that Mr Snow was minded to pay seven shillings a week for his man's maintenance at Bray Farm. Therefore Nicholas found himself able to remain at his comfortable quarters, and within reach of the new influences that had suddenly lifted him from mere existence into passionate life. He looked back into his past days as into a void, and marvelled at such emptiness.

Only to Teddy Merle did the time seem over-long, for his model of mankind, thus chained by the leg, proved but a shadow of himself. Birds were on the moor, snipe bleated by the green marshes, and the plover cried on high. Yet Teddy perceived that the shooting lessons promised could hardly be given until after Christmas, and he mourned for Nicholas as much as himself.

"'Tis cruel wisht for you, Nick," he said, "to bide here an' think of the birds. I seed a brave lot o'

wild duck down Redlake way essterday. You must smart to the heart to think you won't draw trigger again this year."

Edgecombe smiled. Wild duck were no active temptation to mourn his present lot.

"I must live wi'out 'em," he said, "an' ban't so amazin' difficult if you'll believe me, Ted."

Young Merle doubted such philosophy because he did not possess the key of it. He admired Nicholas as much as ever, ran his errands, paid many visits to his home, and reported faithfully concerning the doings of the present occupant, whose operations as narrated quite failed to satisfy Edgecombe.

Concerning the reception of this catastrophe by one other, it demands that a word be spoken. No man is more instructive than when faced with his own faults, and the attitude of Timothy Oldreive, after he learnt how his enemy had indeed met with the wild bull, and come near losing his life, will light the farmer's character. Upon the doing of an evil deed, men young in sin yearn for time to fly, and go impatient and galled, until many hours and days are piled up between them and the act; because only time can blunt memory and deaden the pang of the sharp wound they have given themselves. Thus, when he heard of Edgecombe's ill-fortune, Timothy first raged inwardly, then conceived a plan by which he might kill the gnawing hours, and dispense justice. He determined to destroy the white bull, as first offender in this case, and he assured himself, shouting down conscience with the absurdity, that it was his duty to slay the beast, even at peril of his own life. The peril indeed he dwelt upon and magnified, for that too served speciously to soothe his inner shame.

To Plymouth he went, wasted money on a heavy rifle, and then, keeping his intention secret, made a parcel of provisions that should be large enough to last for two days, and started forth alone to shoot his big game. For a day the herd escaped him; he saw nothing

of them, and slept that night within a snug cleft on the summit of a lonely tor under the stars; but at dawn next day a field-glass revealed his mark deep in the gorges of a river. Proceeding cautiously, he came at length within two hundred yards of the white bull, stalked him to within sixty yards, waited until the brute offered his left shoulder as he lifted his head from drinking, and so shot him through the heart beside the stream.

Then, with some elation, he tramped home again; yet, before he reached Cherrybrook, the glow that had touched his spirit at slaughter was gone, and he felt none the better for it. Thereupon a new impulse to evade this cloud inspired Timothy towards still greater deeds. Driven by his mood he hurried away to seek Edgecombe himself, and make a clean breast of the evil thing still heavy upon him. He felt that in such a case confession must bring its own and instant reward; he was very impatient of the shackles forged by this crime, and wished to slip out of them. Things as bad he had done before, and never slept the worse, but such a deed tented him to the quick, for he was ashamed of himself, and found self-shame hateful beyond endurance.

The hot fit took him to Nicholas Edgecombe's bedside, and there, to lessen his own discomfort, rather than from remorse at the results of his lie, he spoke.

"I shan't keep you," he said, "but I thank you for seeing me all the same, though it's the last time we're ever likely to meet after I tell you what I've done."

"I'd sooner be friends than not," declared Nicholas. 'If you have any fair thing against me, say it out. We'm neighbours, an' there's no call to be enemies that I can see."

"You treated me badly over my gun that day, and went beyond your duty; so I thought, at all events. And it made me a bit wicked against you, and I revenged myself. But 'twas rather a dirty vengeance, and I'm sorry that I took it. I can't say more than

that ; and not many men would own a fault so straight for that matter."

Edgecombe laughed.

"Seeing I'm none the wiser yet, I can't say how it stands, or whether 'twas dirty or whether 'twas natural," he answered.

"As natural as it is to men to tell lies," declared Oldreive.

"That's a new thing to me. Be lies natural? I thought they comed of the devil."

"They're more natural than truth, anyway. Be that as it will, I lied to you. You asked me if I'd seen the white cattle on the moor, and I said 'no.' But I had seen them, and I let you go to them. All the same, I will say, and God knows it's true, that I called after you when you'd gone. But you didn't hear me. Now you know what happened, and it's off my mind."

"Ess, you'm right ; 'twas as dirty an' a blackguard an' a murderous thing as ever I heard told against any man," said Edgecombe thoughtfully.

The other winced.

"It was, I've admitted it. I've done what I could ; and I've shot the damned bull, and I paid sixteen pounds for the rifle I took to do it with. After all's said, you can't tell me I'm responsible for the wickedness of a brute."

"You gave him the chance to be wicked, however. You knowed his nature was to toss a man at sight."

"Well, I've owned up honestly. I'm sorry for what I did and I ask you to forgive me for it if you can. This is worse for me than for you, because it is worse to do evil than suffer it. The devil himself couldn't do more than say he was sorry for his sins."

"An' God A'mighty couldn't do no more than forgive him if he did, come to think of it," admitted Edgecombe.

"Between man and man, then?"

"Between man and man no question at all. I forgive

you altogether. If you'm right at heart, 'tis as you say : you've suffered worse than me."

"I'll show you I'm not so bad as people think."

"None of us be so very bad in general, I believe."

"And you won't feel called upon to publish this when you get about again?"

Edgecombe stared at the question.

"Not me. 'Tis a thing spoke confidential like. You done what the Lord led you into by wan of His dark ways for His own dark ends. If I owe you half an inch off my leg, I may owe you something else here an' there. Things happen inside you when you'm struck down an' have to bide weeks in bed. You done a deed wicked enough, but the upshot ban't all grief to me. Anyway, theer's nothing between us no longer, Timothy Oldreive."

The other was moved, and a rare frankness for a moment touched his heart and escaped at his lips.

"By God! you're a good man," he said. "Not long since I swore I'd lay bare the soul of you, and it appears I have—to my own shame. But God's my judge I'll never speak, or do, or think against you any more. And I thank you for forgiving me, though it was a hard thing to ask it."

He shook Edgecombe by the hand and departed immediately upon this speech.

Neither saw the other again for many days, and in a different spirit they next discoursed upon the ragged summit of Crockern Tor.

The immediate results of this meeting were most diverse. In Edgecombe's case unfamiliar food offered for thought, and from indignation at an evil deed, he passed to passive interest that the doer had confessed it, to curiosity concerning his motives, to surprise that such malignance could grow from so contemptible a cause, and to satisfaction that the matter was for ever buried beneath a friendship. Oldreive's relief on the other hand took active shape in self-indulgence. When he could credit himself with a worthy act, this man always felt called upon to reward himself in the ways

that seemed good to him. Now a weight was off his shoulders and a sense of the virtue of his confession, rather than the vileness of the crime confessed, dominated his spirit. He felt almost heroic upon the following day, for his conscience had entered upon that phase when little was needed to drug it. Timothy now told himself that he had been very good; he admired himself like a child that is praised; he respected himself as a member of society just and punctilious in his dealings; and he felt that he had earned a reward. The sort of recompense proper to his desires lay at Plymouth, and thither he departed, with great complacency of mind, that he might waste money and spend time to the worst possible purpose. From the town he despatched two bottles of champagne to Nicholas Edgecombe.

These visits of the farmer to the seaport were no secret at Two Bridges. How he employed himself there all men knew and most women guessed. At the bar of the "Ring o' Bells" young Oldreive was often openly criticised, to the hurt of Hannah's heart as she listened. But she made no sign when customers declared him to be a slight and licentious man. Of late, however, and in a measure owing to the unconscious influence of the red warrener, Hannah found new impressions rising upon the subject of Oldreive's life. In her mind grew doubt and disquiet when she reflected about him.

Edgecombe was socially some grades beneath Hannah and many below the master of Cherrybrook; yet the manhood of him, the huge frame of him, the simple faith and cheerfulness of him all attracted the daughter of Betty Bradridge. His obvious admiration refreshed her, and she had in fact awakened to very active interests represented by these two men. The position possessed some charm of danger. Both Timothy and Nicholas loved her, but they loved her with a difference, and neither knew that he had a rival. Convinced that she might marry one or other, the woman enjoyed her mingled emotions and weighed

each lover's characteristics. Of her own feelings she made no active examination, but placidly possessed her soul and waited and drifted where chance willed. That neither man had as yet asked her directly to marry him was a source of satisfaction to Hannah, because the fact put off any necessity to make up her mind and postponed the inevitable anticlimax that must follow final decision. Yet their delay awoke some elements of disquiet in one direction and contributed, though she knew it not, to affirm her own choice. That Nicholas should remain dumb, considering his humble occupation and present incapacity, was natural and to his credit; but why Oldreive, despite the closer friendship that now obtained between them, still avoided the definite offer of marriage he led her to expect, secretly troubled Hannah. She was glad he did not speak, and yet his silence angered her; the circumstance that there was no need to decide left her life vague and exciting and pleasant; but that Timothy did not call upon her to decide argued considerable uncertainty in his own mind; and that was not agreeable to the woman.

Her friendship with Mary Merle gave good excuse for many visits to Bray Farm, and as Nicholas gained in strength, could limp a little and sit out of doors again, all three of them were sometimes together.

Upon one of these occasions it was that the eyes of Hannah suddenly opened to another fact, and fire smouldered within the depths there—a fire that consumed in one short moment the friendship of years. She saw Mary put a pillow behind Nick's head, then bring him a footstool, and then sit down by the invalid's feet and look up at him. She read her simple companion like a book, and understood every tremor of lip and lid. Knowledge thus gleaned instantly called for a shrewder, deeper study of the man. Did he return his nurse's love in any sort? Hannah, awake for once to the very finger-tips, her heart throbbing in her deep bosom before this discovery, set herself to solve the problem. Was the love that had shot from his truthful

eyes a myth of her own dreaming? Was it only a half-love shared with another woman? She shuddered at the thought, then blushed at the possibility of error. Her self-esteem smarted now, and a pinch of anger dropped into her heart and quickened and nourished the emotion there. Indignation woke before the vision of a rival—and such a rival. If the man did not wholly love her, he must be made to do so.

When Nicholas could creep about again with two crutches, his master strongly advised that he should descend from Bray Farm and complete his cure at the "Ring o' Bells," where greater comfort and easier exercise on level ground would be possible. But Mr Snow had not thought of this wise course himself. He owed the happy inspiration to his wife, and she, good soul, was prompted privately by Hannah Bradridge.

CHAPTER IX

MARK TROUT IN TROUBLE

MRS SAGE sat in her corner as usual, and she sat alone, for the little bar was empty. There had come an element of novelty to the inn with the arrival of Nicholas Edgecombe, and, for her part, the old woman was not beyond enjoyment of change and stir. She liked the warrener, and mused about his life, his manners and simple conversation. Now, while she sat occupied with this theme, Mark Trout entered. Not observing that the bar was empty, he called for a pint of beer while yet in the doorway; and there was a defiance in his voice, a ring of ferocity rather than thirst, that attracted granny's attention.

"A pint," she said. "Why so much so early?"

"I'm very much under the weather, ma'am," he answered. "My misfortunes do gain upon me so cruel that be blessed if I know wheer they will end 'pon fifteen shillings a week. My missis have just broke it to me this marnin' how there's another comin'—that'll be eleven. What's a poor devil to do?"

"'Do'?" answered Mrs Sage with sternness. "Do what the Lord done with the rain after Noah's flood: stop it. A man don't get a family like he gets a fever or a fortune: by the will of heaven. We'm free agents in the matter of childer; an' although you float up to your fat neck in beer, it won't make you no less accountable."

"If I was a French foreigner, I hear tell as I should be richly rewarded instead of laughed at," grumbled Mr Trout.

"Them!" returned the old woman contemptuously. "No doubt 'twould be a wonnerful feat for a frog-eating

man to have so much nature in him. But for an English chap, 'tis no more to be admired than a farrow of ten. I be thinking of your missis more'n you. Poor dear sawl—an' you promised to love an' cherish her, an' all the rest of it."

"'Twas like this," explained Mark Trout fretfully. "Us was set on a man child from the first; an' us had to fill the house to get un. Yes, us had the house full 'fore a bwoy comed. Cheel after cheel 'twas—five maids running in fact; then my old woman lost heart an' began to talk 'bout Providence, as females will do when they'm crossed. So I comforted her with the bravery of a man. 'Damn Providence!' I said to her in my courageous way; an' be blessed if the next wasn't a bwoy! So it went on."

Mrs Sage nodded.

"Well, ban't no case for pity as I can see; an' pity's a poor plaster whether or no. Beer won't help you anyhow. You've got another immortal young sawl'budding for earth; an' 'tis your duty to launch it 'pon the pilgrimage so well as you can, an' give it every chance."

"An' when you think how many of the quality would give ten acres of ground, even for a female child, it do make me cuss that the ways of nature be so perfuse an' lop-sided," growled the father.

Then Scobhull and Merryweather Chugg entered together, and the latter inquired the cause of Trout's irritation.

"His wife be gwaine to bring another everlasting creature in the world," said Mrs Sage; "an' he's doubling his liquor about it, like a fool."

Sorrow Scobhull regarded the stableman with silent interest. He was a bachelor himself, yet his life, through which Dart ran brimming over with her burden of mystery and terror, found moments in it for love. There was a woman even in his mind; but now he speculated on this full nest of another man's children.

"'Tis coorious to think what will fall to the share of that great flock," he said. "Ban't in nature they should all be fortunate and all die in their beds."

"You sour creature!" cried Chugg. "You'm thinking as the river haven't had a life for two year—that's what you'm thinking! An' your ugly fancy be that one young Trout more or less wouldn't make or mar the world. Doan't shake your head. 'Twas in your wild horse's eyes, for I seed it looking out. An' if I was Trout I'd strike you—ess fay, I would."

But the man with the full quiver did not show the least annoyance at this idea.

Axworthy, who had entered a moment earlier, ventured on a jest.

"Come to think of it, Dart's the place for young Trout—eh?"

"You'm too funny for the likes of us," answered the water-bailiff. "You'm lost here. You should go for a merryman an' wear a red seat to your breeches an' a red patch to your nose."

Mr Trout drank his pint of beer and paid for it to Mrs Bradridge who had now entered her bar. His stimulant gone, he departed and Merryweather Chugg discussed him.

"Properly vexed seemingly. What's the matter with him now?" inquired Betty.

Her mother related the news, to the other's anger.

"'Tis little better than a scandal! I've a good mind to turn him off, an' if it wasn't for his wife I would do. The man's no better'n a beast of prey."

Mr Chugg, who had an adult family, three of whom were married and settled to his content, nodded mournfully.

"To get eleven under fifteen year, an' not a pair of twins among 'em, be four-footed manners for sartain," he confessed.

"'Tis the will o' God, not the fault of the ostler," declared Scobhull suddenly. "What's a mere man, to stand up an' say he'll have but two childer, if the Lord's ordained he shall have eleven? Us can't judge no man's acts, because they've got to be acted whether he will or no. Bachelor man though I be, if the Lord has written a score o' childer to my name,

have 'em I shall. An' if they'm to be mighty men or only stone-breakers, or food for Dart, so it will fall out.

"That's foolishness," declared Betty, "an' you know 'tis, Sorrow Scobhull. You might just so well say as your road metal would get broke without your hammer; you might just so well give up using your horn spectacles because you won't be struck an' blinded unless 'tis God's will you should be. 'Tis Him keeps your eyes whole, not the specs. Why for wear 'em to work then?"

"Got 'e theer, my son," said Chugg laughing. "Now come along. Your stone won't break without your hammers, for miracles ban't the rule on Dartymoor; an' I've got to draw a badger down to Hexworthy this afternoon. An' he won't be drawed because I want un to be, without me an' my dog does our share of the work."

But Scobhull was not entirely silenced.

"In little things us must do our part, an' the smaller we be the less to answer for; but in great things 'tis no use taking thought," he said. "I do believe in my heart as the river will have me one day. Yet you might say, if I turned my back upon it an' went an' lived in a town, as her never could catch me. But I doan't go. For why? 'Cause 'tis fore-ordained I bide here."

"Never did honest water get in a chap's head afore," said Mr Chugg. "Yet Dart be worse than drink to you."

"What's got to be will be," answered Scobhull, picking up his wallet and hammers.

"Nobody can answer nothing against that," murmured the old woman in the corner. "Why things be as they be us can't tell—no more than us can tell why a long-faaced cow be a gude milker an' a butt-faaced is awnly fit for beef. We know 'tis so; awnly God A'mighty can say why 'tis so."

Varying quantities of liquor washed down all this wisdom and granny herself partook of her morning

drink: a tumbler of weak rum and water. Then Nicholas Edgecombe entered the bar, and Merryweather and Axworthy congratulated him very warmly.

"That's good, that is—foot to ground again and a stick instead of a crutch. A great sign of progress to be sure," said the water-bailiff.

Nicholas grinned and looked down at his leg.

"Ess, I be on it again, though it do feel more like a log o' wood than a limb. Can't believe as ever 'twill travel like it used."

"You'll go short," said Scobhull. "You'll go short 'pon that side for evermore."

"Nought to name, however," declared Edgecombe. "Won't be seen if I put up the stirrup an inch an' have a extra sole to my boot—so Doctor Light says. By the end of the month he reckons I shall get home-along an' to work; an' not afore 'tis time."

"You did ought to cast your eyes about you for a wife," said Mr Chugg, who thought highly of the warrener and still had one unmarried daughter.

Nicholas became fiery red to his neck, and Hannah's eyes grew misty where she stood and drew beer for the men.

"Who'd have a hulking chap like me, an' live in my li'l old hut on the hill?"

"Last man there had a very good wife," said Axworthy, and Chugg proceeded.

"'Tis only to find the maiden as looks at 'e with a proper mind, an' her would so soon live in a dog-kennel with 'e as a house in a town. Many of 'em be fond enough of Dartymoor to live in it all their days. My own wife haven't been further than Ashburton for ten year. There's no hardship in living where you'm born; an' you wants a girl with a bit of pluck, that's all—a girl as won't be afraid of firing a gun off, to let you know her needs you when you chance to be a mile or two away. I mind how Mrs Cherry—last man's wife up there—had need sudden of her husband, 'cause one of the children pitched off a rock an' put his shoulder out. So the mother took a gun an' shut her eyes, an'

pulled trigger. But weern't a blank cartridge, an', unknowingly, she pintoed the gun slap into a pen o' spangled fowls as they kept; an' when Cherry comed running back, her'd shot five of 'em dead an' mangled three more. A purty come-along-of-it for poor folks."

"What would you have done, Mr Edgecombe?" asked Hannah.

"Why," he answered, laughing at the tragedy, "I'd have took the child in one hand an' birds in t'other an' tramped to Princetown, an' got the little man's bones righted an' sold the poultry, an' paid Doctor with the money."

"Theer's sense for 'e," murmured Mrs Sage.

Mr Chugg nodded, and every man went his way until only Nicholas, Hannah and the ancient dame were left together. Edgecombe took a stool by the ingle, and sat down near granny. There came no sound but his pipe, and a clink and tinkle where Hannah was washing glasses behind the bar.

In her heart the young woman dreamed a little of the cot beyond Wistman's Wood, and pictured herself as dwelling in it. She found the idea pleasant, for, since his sojourn at the "Ring o' Bells," her admiration of Nicholas grew steadily; and it happened meantime that Timothy Oldreive, ignorant of all danger, persisted in a course of action likely to lessen his ultimate success. The ease with which he found himself able for a week at a time to keep away from her nettled Hannah more than she cared to confess to herself. Such actions also made her doubt his soft glances and ardent words, his assurances, and secret pressure of the hand when he did come to see her.

What had he to do at Plymouth so often? and was it true what the farmers said, that Cherrybrook sank from bad to worse, that the starved land cried for food, that no man ever saw Timothy doing a day's work upon it? From these unpleasant questions she turned to the warrener's simple life at the heart of the Moor. Her emotions deepened and carried her forward more

quickly than she anticipated. It was through her attitude to the former friend of her own sex that she suspected her own heart's secret, and began to guess which of these two men she could least endure the thought of losing.

How Mary Merle's young heart had passed in secret to Edgecombe, Hannah now knew, and that jealousy was waking within her own bosom the elder discovered with secret blushes, because this fact immediately lifted Nicholas on to a pinnacle apart. Of Timothy Oldreive she had not been jealous. His absences, his rumoured attentions to other maidens had never, until the present, troubled her at all. She always felt perfectly safe in the conviction that she might win him if she willed, but with regard to the other man it was different. Edgecombe's love she believed to be hers, yet she viewed his courtesies to Mary with unrest. She compared herself frankly to the daughter of Mrs Merle, and, setting aside her physical advantages, found that Mary excelled her in those practical accomplishments first to be desired for a wife who should live at Wistman's Wood.

Meantime, within the heart of Mary herself, and without one thought deliberately to do so, Nicholas had wakened a trembling hope. Its weak wings fluttered by night. While Hannah's love had already flowered into a luxuriant passion that filled her dreams with visions of happiness, the other girl's first desire towards a man terrified her. Any thought of being Edgecombe's wife made her grow cold, and she frightened love away again and again until, piqued perhaps, the god planted his arrow so deeply that none might again pluck it thence without destruction to the heart that held it. Edgecombe's gratitude and consistent genial bearing towards Mary set the seal upon her secret worship. She fancied that more than gratitude must go to such a mien, for young in the world though she was, the woman had learnt that gratitude is the heaviest possible payment to demand of any human being for service done. Common men

know not the word, so Mary built special significance upon the behaviour of an uncommon man, whom chance had made gentle though his calling was rough. With none of those rich tinctures that imbued Hannah's dreams did her timid fancies glow. Their highest lights only shone in the hope of ministering to the red man's good, of keeping him warm, comfortable, well fed, and of lessening the hardships incidental to his life. Thus would her own happiness and contentment be the greater. But even so modest an apparition vanished with daylight before her looking-glass. Then she would shut her eyes upon her face and waste time in brushing her beautiful hair. The kiss of it against her cheek, the caress of it on her shoulders comforted her, for it was long and lovely and soft as silk. She wished that he could see it, then stamped her foot and screwed it up more tightly than usual.

As Hannah had come to Bray Farm, so now Mary visited the "Ring o' Bells" with ingenuous frequency. She found her brother a useful pretext on these occasions, for he was often missing, and she began to manifest a novel interest in Teddy's movements that not seldom took her to Two Bridges.

It happened that upon one of these occasions Mary met Mrs Sage alone, spoke with her awhile, and found herself met with a crushing blow. She smarted before this certainty, although her soul had often whispered the possibility before; yet now it chanced that the actual announcement hurt doubly, coming as it did upon an incident not five minutes old. While the girl was walking down from Bray Farm to the inn, she had passed Hannah and Timothy Oldreive in the farmer's trap; but now, after granny's utterance, the memory of these two thus together angered and bewildered her.

"Pitch alongside the fire," said Mrs Sage, who liked Mary. "Pitch there for a bit, an' have a tell with me. No, your brother ban't here as I knaws about; but Nicholas Edgecombe be. Not that that matters to you, of course."

Her old eyes, still bright in the pale, wrinkled face, saw red upon Mary's cheek.

"I know, I know, my dear—though none else have found it out yet. I be cleverer than my darter and gran'darter put together; an' I guess why you have took so kindly to the 'Ring o' Bells' of late days."

"Please, mother, don't whisper such an awful thing!" implored Mary, hot and cold by turns. "To think—oh, I'll never, never come no more; I'll——"

"Lord! I doan't blame 'e. An' they doan't guess. 'Cause why? They'm in the game, an' I be looking on. Best for your peace of mind that I tell you how 'tis. Hannah's half in love with this chap, and half in love with t'other; an' my darter be mad about it, 'cause 'tis a terrible fall for a Bradridge to think twice concerning a common rabbit-catcher. Of course Betty wants the child to mate along with young Oldreive, an' her's in a fever to pack Nicholas Edgecombe off home. She've cussed the day she took the young man in, but only to my ear."

"An' him—Mr Edgecombe?"

"He'm a deal too plain an' simple to hide his meaning. I lay he never gazed 'pon a woman with longing afore. He loves the earth under our Hannah's feet."

Mary sighed, and the slight sound caught the other's ear.

"I'm sorry for 'e. I hoped you hadn't thought much about the man."

"No, no—of course not, mother. He'm too good an' handsome for the likes of me." She laughed, twisted her fingers over her knees, and kept her eyes upon the glowing peat.

"I'd sooner you cried than laughed," said granny. "Theer's more sorts o' tears than one; an' they be more like to soothe your heart than laughter."

"It hurts to cry—besides, what should I cry about?"

But the old woman was busy with her own thoughts, and the subject, wakened by a chance word, she now pursued in broken murmurs, without concern for any listener.

"Tears," she said; "I know 'em—all sorts—so different as the early an' latter rain—so different as the balm that brings green come spring an' the lashing white rain of autumn time, wi' all the sting of the west wind behind it. . . . If I doan't know, who should? A woman of eighty have done her share of the world's weeping I think—as becomes her who have been wife, an' mother, an' widow. . . . My eyes was bluer once than now they be. In my young April they shined like the lupins—shined through a maid's tears, as dry quicker'n dew, shined. . . . But what a chitter! To tell a woman's sad an' happy tears be to tell her life. . . . Tears in secret. . . . Tears alongside of graves. . . . Tears that soothe an' float a weary body to sleep. . . . Tears that burn like fire an' wash a poor, foundered sawl naked an' shivering to the footstool of the Lord. . . ."

"I'm sure I think they'm the rain that keeps women's flesh moist an' plump, if you ax me," said Betty Bradridge, who had entered the bar. "I wish I could shed 'em easier; but I'm so dry as a cricket—always was. 'Twas just all I could do to squeeze out a few drops when my dear man died—an' hot as hell they were. 'Tis a bad thing not to weep easy, as I've often found; for God, He knows, I've had as much to cry about as most, an' a bit more than some. Did 'e pass Oldreive an' my Hannah going up the hill to Tavistock, Mary?"

"'Ess, ma'am, I did."

"A proper couple they looked behind his great mare, no doubt."

"Pity the gert mare ban't paid for," said Mrs Sage.

"He've got a round thousand in the bank, however, for he told me so, mother, last time I had mouth-speech with him."

The ancient sniffed doubtfully.

"'Tis what bills be out against a man as I judges him by," she said. "Look through a man's bills an' ——"

Mrs Bradridge interrupted by bringing down a pint pot with a bang.

"Always got something against the fellow you have

—just because he's a gentleman born, an' have bigger ideas than the chaps round about! He'm worth twenty pound a year to us in ready money whether or no, so we've got no call to quarrel with him."

Mrs Sage kept her faded blue eyes shut and made no reply. Then Mary rose to go upon her way, and it chanced that beside the inn door sat Nicholas, so she exchanged some words with him before starting for home.

Their brief conversation touched his health and speedy return to work. Then he mentioned Hannah and poured praises upon her beauty and her goodness, until Mary found herself battling with frantic desire to speak of what she had just heard; to hint that Hannah was at least fond of Timothy Oldreive, and he of her. But the girl fled from this temptation by flying from Nicholas himself.

Henceforward for many days her new dawn was over-clouded; because the sun warmed her no longer and the light waned and flickered and fainted, until her life was dead and sere as the winter moors that surrounded it. She learned many things and found, with some astonishment, how empty grew the daily round of duty that once was all-sufficing.

CHAPTER X

THE JUDICIOUS WORD

TWO days after Nicholas Edgcombe had returned to his home, Mrs Bradridge sought a private meeting with the master of Cherrybrook Farm. Though not a scrupulous woman, she had a sense of seemliness, and it prevented her from scheming against the warrener while yet he was a guest under her roof. But now she hastened to circumvent a possibility that had of late grown painfully apparent. Edgcombe indeed she did not fear alone; but Hannah's attitude towards him made her feel very uneasy. Her first interest in life was her daughter, and she yearned to see the girl wedded to Timothy Oldreive. She believed that once married to a practical wife, the farmer would settle down, grow steady, develop his property and take a worthy place on the country side. There was a glamour about Timothy that deceived this hard-hearted soul and made her desire him for a son-in-law. His educated speech was secretly a source of admiration to Betty; his wildness of life she disregarded; the qualified repute in which others held him she called jealousy at the young man's breeding. "Wrong side the blanket or right side, a gentleman be a gentleman," declared Mrs Bradridge.

She realised that Hannah was holding a balance between the men and perceived that Oldreive knew nothing of a rival. The farmer pursued his casual road, made no effort to hasten his romance and ignorantly piqued Hannah by the waywardness of his attentions. This observing, Betty Bradridge determined to tell Timothy of his danger. To do so was not easy, for no absolute word of love had been spoken by Oldreive to Hannah; but she trusted her quick tongue and

shrewd perceptions, left the "Ring o' Bells" one morning when she knew the young man should be at home ploughing, and tramped off after breakfast, first giving out that she meant to visit Mrs Chugg. Cherrybrook Farm extended beside the stream of that name, and its dwelling-house stood by the river. Earth as good as any snatched from the Moor stretched round about, and half a mile distant, nigh the main road that here passes upon its way to Ashburton, deep peat cuttings extended, ridge on ridge. Now they shone a chocolate red under the low sun, and the manifold life and beauty hidden within them slept, soon to waken with the spring. Cherrybrook ran in the midst to join Dart not far distant.

Mrs Bradridge found Timothy teaching a new hand to plough. In secret she remembered the blind leading the blind, for the farmer's own pattern furrows were as irregular as his life; but she made no comment, and he, seeing such an unusual visitor, very gladly abandoned the share, and invited Betty within doors.

"Have something to drink, mother?" he said. "You've never seen my place before, I think, so you ought to mark the event."

"I want to have a tell along with you," she answered. "My stars! what a jakes of a mess! 'Twould turn a woman's hair grey to face such a pig's-sty; yet, all the same, 'tis a woman you want about the house; an' I lay you'll never be tidy, nor yet steady, nor yet happy till you've got a wife. That, being old enough for your mother, you'll let me say."

He laughed, cleared and dusted a chair for her, then mended a peat fire, sunk to white ashes.

"I live in the kitchen because it's less trouble. As to a wife—well—so many lies are told, that the girls are frightened of me. The only friends I have live at Two Bridges."

Mrs Bradridge nodded, rose and began to make the room tidy.

"Doan't mind me," she said, "I'm always happier bustling than sitting still. My tongue an' my head

work easier if hand and foot be going too. I'll just make things a thought vitty for 'e while I talk. Yes, you've got good friends to Two Bridges; but I'm surprised you know it. I thought you hadn't found it out yet."

He was conscious of what she meant, and made a weak effort to justify his conduct.

"Well, you see, it takes two to make a bargain, mother. And, for all my sins, I haven't got a very high conceit of myself. I'm not so bad as they tell you; yet that's not to say I'm good enough for Hannah. No man that ever I met was."

"'Tis for her to decide that point, I should think."

"You don't mean——?" he said, pretending surprise.

"I'll tell you what I mean. I'm fond of you, for you'm a gentleman; an' I want you to marry my darter, an' I've seen many days that the thought to do it is in you. Else I shouldn't be here. If I'm right, say so, afore I go on."

"Yes, indeed, God knows you are—only——"

"The only 'only' about the matter be another man," she said hastily. "Life's fleeting, an' maidens can't bide young for long—not even their hearts can't. You blow too hot an' cold for a woman that's hot all through like my Hannah. There's others more steadfast. Best I name no names; but——"

"You must," he declared. "You've gone so far that you must. We'll have fair fighting."

Timothy was all on fire himself now, and hot enough in the pursuit to satisfy even Mrs Bradridge. The element of opposition alone had been needed to fan his smouldering desires into a blaze. This the woman now perceived, and followed her advantage.

"No, can't name no names. But one thing I'll promise you there's solid danger of losing her, though I could have sworn her mind was set your way. But what with your coldness and his worship—she'm blown about. I've seen it each day since he came, and since he've gone too."

"Good Lord! You don't mean that rabbit man? Not Nicholas Edgecombe?"

"There!" said the other, apparently much annoyed with herself, "if I haven't been and let it out! You'm so sharp as a lawyer. Yes, 'tis that great red chap as Hannah's had in her eyes of late."

Conflicting emotions bubbled up in Oldreive, and his new-formed friendship with Nicholas was shattered by the strain of such a revelation.

"A clod like that to look at Hannah!"

"A cat may look at a king. Everybody looks at her down to the bullock drovers; but the plague is that she have looked at him. Seems as if all the sense in the world be used up an' there isn't none left for the rising generation. I don't say the man's a bad character. All the same I don't trust that open-faced, smiling sort. There's always a depth to them.

"Why, he's a clown—a mere moor-man, useful for nothing but to kill rabbits. Hannah—good Lord!

"I do think the chap be treacherous, however," confessed Mrs Bradridge, with a pinch at her heart as she told the lie. "Very little good ever comes of red hair, an' them speckled eyes. He've a temper too, though he hides it; an' he's so poor as a coot of course."

"He's worthless I tell you. I thought the brute had some good stuff in him; I promised him my friendship even, but this—behind my back and while he was under your roof! How *can* Hannah? Nicholas Edgecombe was born to rouse the devil in me I think."

"A calculating man, I do believe. Anyway he has filled my darter's eye. So I thought it was only honest and fair to you——"

"I should think so! You know where her true happiness lies at any rate. A beggar—a low thief sprung from the deuce knows where!"

"'Twas a very dishonest deed come to think of it—making eyes at my girl," said Mrs Bradridge, reconciling her heart to this calumny on an absent man. "I did all I could for un; I made him so welcome as March dust: I charged bare dues, though I will say he's promised to make it up in snipe an' golden plover presently. But of course that may be only talk. Any-

how, to court Hannah in secret was very unmannerly—what d'you say?"

"Worse—a piece of cursed treachery to you and to me. Doubly to me, who swore to be his friend. To think—the ten commandments—canting rascal!"

"As to that, us can't swear he knowed about you an' Hannah."

"Of course he did. Everybody does. Why, half a score of men have congratulated me on my luck already."

"If that's so," said Mrs Bradridge drily, "'tis time us all knowed where us stood."

He was silent, and, having made her point, she returned to Edgecombe.

"Supposing Edgecombe really understood you was first in the field, he'm a knave, I'm sure."

"He is knave; and worse than any knave I ever met with. I could have forgiven him again, as I have before; but I'll never forgive this."

"My fingers have itched to slap his face when I've seed his eyes glued on Hannah, an' love bursting out of him, louder than a trumpet blast, though silent."

"Lucky I never saw it! But my Hannah—yes, I will say 'my Hannah.' Could she like him and me too? The thing's impossible."

"You see—since we're on it—a maiden be soon nettled where she ban't put first. With Hannah Bradridge 'tis all or none. Her ban't built to go halves or be content with other folk's leavings. If Plymouth be pleasanter to you than the 'Ring o' Bells'—. You understand. This hulking, hairy chap haven't got no education, but his calf love—such as it is—be hers to the dregs. She knows it's all hers; she knows that love of her fills up his lonely days to the brim. They take pride in such a thing as that—girls do. They like to think it; though we as be married find out often that it's never true of even the best of you. Anyway she knows very well she don't fill your life—or half fill it."

"She does—she's everything, everything to me. Only

I can't kneel at her feet all day long. I'm a busy man. All the same, if she thinks I'm cold and not in earnest, I'll show her differently before the week's out. She's just life to me, and I'd kill anybody who doubted it."

"Tell her so, then; tell her, same as you've told me. That'll knock t'other on the head once for all. My darter thought as you put your liberty afore your love. I'm glad for her sake she was wrong. You see, she'm a dreaming fashion of girl—more like granny than me—an' she've got it in her head that she saved Edgecombe's life. Leastways, he was always telling her so, an' now she quite believes it. So that's another thing against you; because every proper woman is a mother in heart if not in deed, so she feels a mixture of mother an' lover to the man. You know now what silliness is going forward. 'Tis off my mind. But I had to tell 'e. The rest bides with you."

"It does. I'll soon think it out, then act."

"Yes; an' you might be wiser to act first an' think afterwards, though it ban't a very clever way most times. Only they be young, an' both hot an'——"

"You're hiding something," he interrupted suddenly. "This has gone further than you have told me."

"I don't know how far it has gone. 'Tis for you to find out, I should think, not me. I can do nothing. The maiden's in your hands, like clay in the potter's."

"I'll show her the folly of it and laugh her out of thinking any more about this worthless man."

"Worthless as dirt, no doubt. Not worth so many words as we've wasted on un, I reckon. I'll go now; an' I'll ax you to keep so dumb as a newt about this visit. I told 'em that I was coming out to see Mrs Chugg."

Timothy promised silence and Mrs Bradridge departed. She crossed Cherrybrook by the high road, and then, upon her homeward way, called at Merryweather Chugg's cottage, where it stood beside an avenue of beech trees that extended towards Prince Hall. Here good store of larch and pine, planted long since, still flourished and defied the winter weather.

Mrs Chugg had gone to market, but her daughter

was at home, so Betty sat down a while, that her visit might be proved circumstantially. Jenny Chugg, a flaxen, Saxon maiden, very like her father, peeled potatoes, while Mrs Bradridge discoursed, with her thoughts still upon matrimony.

"So you'm the last left," she said. "Sure, I can't think what your mother will do when right man comes along for you, Jenny."

"Time enough when he do come; but mother says I'm years too young yet," answered the girl, smiling. Then she laughed shrilly at a recollection.

"Not but I might marry, I almost do believe, if I liked. Mr Scobhull be looking with his frightened eyes towards me—half as if he'd seed a ghost, half as if he wanted to kiss me if he dared."

"Him! Why, the poor man be three halfpence short of a shilling, as we say—weak in his intellects."

Jenny laughed again.

"He's harmless enough."

"Don't you be too sure of that. There's always a chance with such a pent-up man that he may burst. Best be plain with him."

"I wouldn't marry him, though 'tis a fact that faither's got a kind of softness towards him."

"Your faither be soft himself—to say it without rudeness. Never seed a man with such a power of trusting folks. No judge of character at all."

"Except in the matter of poachers. When he broke Samson Munday's head and the man nearly died in hospital, faither said that if he died he'd mourn no more than a person might mourn a mouse. 'That sort's better underground than on it,' is what my faither says of poaching chaps, though he's weak as water 'bout everything but salmon. He'm very good to Mr Scobhull, because the man's lonely, an' don't neighbour kindly with anybody, an' don't keep no company but his own thoughts most times. I be sorry for un too, for that matter."

Mrs Bradridge was suddenly fired with a great thought. She had suffered not a little during the last

hour, when she had reflected upon her attitude to Nicholas Edgecombe. In reality she had no grievance against him, save that her daughter appeared to like him.

"Edgecombe of Wistman's warren be another chap your faither sets great store by," she said.

"Never seed un," answered Jenny; "though I have heard my faither say he was a proper chap."

"My dear girl, he'm worth talkin' about if you like! Never met a young youth I took to kinder myself."

"A red man, ban't he?"

"A good deep red, like fire—a bullock for strength an' a great power of laughter. Sometimes, if a thing tickled his fancy, he'd roar out till the glasses sang an' nearly hopped off the dresser. A very honest man."

"What do Hannah think of un, Mrs Bradridge?"

Betty looked very sly.

"Likes un so well as a maid may, whose heart be gone already."

"'Tis true then about Mr Oldreive?"

"True as Scripture, but doan't you so much as whisper it till I say you may."

"He'm a handsome chap now if you like," said Jenny critically.

"Very well—but lighter in the bone than 'tother—as his breeding would make him. Haven't got the thews and sinews of Nicholas. I like him very much indeed—Mr Edgecombe, I mean; an' when you get a chance, you might let him know it. Not a chap to take advantage of a poor widow an' a house of women folks. Ax your faither to ax the man to tea."

"Wouldn't look at me, I reckon. Mother says I be only half-fledged yet."

"Give him the chance to—a very promising man. . . . Well, now I must be going; an' tell Mrs Chugg I'm sorry I missed her, though we'm sure to meet inside forty-eight hours."

Betty then took herself off, sanguine that something must come of the morning's work, yet a little in doubt as to what manner of crop would reward such careful sowing.

CHAPTER XI

AN ALTAR

NICHOLAS EDGECOMBE had always been reasonably wise within the narrow radius of his life. Chance, not choice, ordered his days lonely, but his attitude to his fellowmen was no hermit one; he accepted friendship gladly when offered; he never passed the "Ring o' Bells" without entering to hear his own voice and learn the news. He was content with the good that came, did not pry under each leaf and stone for a tragedy, preserved a fundamental simplicity of ideas. Yet at last the punctual march of his inner life was shattered, and love, transfiguring all things, opened his eyes to a phase in his environment hidden until now. His heart waxed warm and also grew bewildered before such a revelation. His own unrest in the full tide of this experience at first made observation and reflection impossible. According to his custom, he rushed to the New Testament and read a whole book at a time that he might discover fresh wisdom therein by the light of his new emotion. He speculated much upon his Lord's brethren and sisters. He felt a sort of sorrow that they were not among His followers, that the prophet only lacked honour amid his own kin and in his own country. Yet a text comforted his humane heart after he had pictured Christ's sad surprise at finding His own flesh and blood so cold before the great message. Jesus indeed marvelled at their unbelief and departed; yet elsewhere the reader was gladdened to see how a mother, sisters, and brothers ministered to the wants of the Lord. Concerning those sisters, Edgecombe specially reflected, and wondered how much beyond mere maidenhood

they possessed in common with this precious living woman of his heart. Hannah now became the warrener's life, for good or evil. He had already made the familiar error into which primitive men perforce fall headlong when they love. Knowing little or nothing as yet of the real Hannah, he believed that he knew all. To him she was beyond measure perfect—the lovely realisation of every virtue that God can bestow upon woman. Within her splendid physical presence he shrined a great soul, and credited the girl with a stability of character, a loftiness of spirit, by many degrees above the truth. With all love's generosity he ennobled her, and was himself ennobled by contemplating a character created out of himself. After he had left the inn for a day and night, after he had lived again in the solitude of his own home for that space, his ear ached for one note of her voice, his eye yearned for one flutter of her garment. He found that no sort of peace could return into his life until he had asked Hannah Bradridge to marry him. That she would not say "yes" he felt assured, but that he must hear her deny him he was equally positive.

The stress of this emotion made itself very apparent in the life of so ingenuous a man, and Teddy Merle was the first to mark a great and mournful change in his friend. More in sorrow than anger he recorded his impressions for the benefit of Mary; and she found the matter very interesting.

"Gone daft he have seemingly," grumbled the boy. "Does his work, of course, an' takes two rabbits where t'other chap took one; yet not a penn'orth of spirit in un. An' he doan't care a damn whether he hits a bird or misses it—unless 'tis meant for the 'Ring o' Bells.' That's where all the golden plover goes to now."

"I'm sure us gets plenty too," protested Mary. "Mother's enjoyed nought so much as they li'l snipes since faither was alive to shoot 'em."

"Snipes is common; the golden plover goes to the 'Ring o' Bells,'" repeated Teddy. Then he hazarded his own grave opinion.

"I be feared that when thicky white bull tossed Mr Edgecombe in the air, his head was hurted so well as his leg. He ban't his own man by no means ever since."

Mary wondered whose man he was, or would be. Despite the crushing assurance of Mrs Sage that Edgecombe loved Hannah, the girl still hoped a little in secret. So many snipe came to Bray Farm; and Nicholas himself not seldom visited the good Samaritans there. Once or twice it had even seemed to Mary that the warrener was on the point of uttering some great and secret thing. He had looked upon her strangely, sighed and spoken listlessly with his eyes far away. Hope still stole into her heart at moments of loneliness—by night, in red sunsets over the moor-edge, or at dawn when she went to milk the cows. Such sanguine thoughts had risen since Mrs Bradridge whispered that Hannah was already engaged to Timothy Oldreive; and not doubting the truth of the fact, Mary's own dreams took fresh colour, until Mrs Merle perceived that her daughter was developing a new and strange aptitude for wasting time.

Now Mary answered the boy with indignation.

"His head! 'Tis only your empty head could think such nonsense. All the world ban't like you, to put sporting before serious matters. He'm too wise to live for nothing but guns an' fishing-rods an' ferrets."

"He did, afore he broke his leg, however," argued Teddy; "an' if you want a sign, I'll tell you another terrible coorious thing he'm doing now in his spare time. You mind that hole where you an' Hannah Bradridge found him? Well, alongside of it, close to Devil's Tor, the chap do tramp once a week. I went to find un not long ago and met him putting up a pile o' stones, so neat as a wall—square like a small table. An' many of the great stones he'd fetched from quarter of a mile off. 'Whatever be doing of, Nick?' I says to him. 'Building a place for victuals, or is it to coax the rabbits?' 'Neither,' he says back. 'You wouldn't understand, Ted, ezacally what 'tis; but 'tis set up for

a mark an' a memory of what befalled me here.' 'Don't want no pile of stones to keep you in mind of that I should think,' I says to him; an' he says, 'No—all the same I be going to build up an altar here, same as they Old Testament heroes done; an' others in times past upon this identical place—that is if there's any meaning in the old stones an' roundy-poundies.' Then I whistled an' offered for to help him. But he said no hand must lift the stones but his. So in course I seed the bull had hurt his head, for never any chap, except he was soft in the napper-case, would talk such foolishness an' do such foolishness."

Teddy left it at that and Mary Merle, without more argument, took his intelligence to her little chamber and wasted an hour with it. The incident fascinated her mind, because it threw a new light upon Nicholas and made what was beautiful in him still more beautiful. With her heart quickening at the bold thought, she determined to climb the Moor and try and meet him at this work. If absent she would be enabled the better to see the stones that he had raised to mark his deliverance. Her mind leapt to his mind at his labour, and she seemed to feel the thoughts that thronged it. She lived in his past lonely night of pain, in his scorching dawn, in his dying hope, in his salvation and in the cry that came to his lips when Hannah's laughter told the good news. "Any other man would have shouted for help," she reflected. "His first thought was our danger."

Two days later, when Teddy had gone to Princetown, his sister, with some trembling of knees, climbed northward over the huge waste spaces of Bair Down, passed the cluster of tors that surmounts it and, setting her face steadily to the Moor, ascended at length to the flat head of Devil's Tor, upon the fringe of those morasses that stretch thence to the heart of the inner loneliness.

Here, not far distant from the Bair Down Man, whose granite mass was familiar to her, Mary became conscious of a new feature in the landscape. Above

the gully into which Nicholas had been hurled, there stood a low, flat table of granite, piled square and lifted two feet above the ground. The spot appeared deserted, and she sat down upon the new monument to rest awhile and think what this labour meant to the builder. Then her pulse throbbed and almost stood still a moment, for suddenly, from the channel beneath her, Edgecombe's big red head appeared and he laboured out with a heavy stone.

"I never!" he said. "If you ban't here by magic to see me set last piece to the lot! There! No call to move—I like to see you sitting 'pon it. 'Tis finished now, an' I'm bold to hope 'twill bide here for many a year, for it can't hurt nobody."

"You frightened me, popping up that sudden," she said. "'Tis to mark your grievous accident, no doubt, Mr Edgecombe?"

"I've axed you to call me 'Nicholas,' like everybody else. Yes, 'twas to mark that, an' more than that, Mary."

"A labour of love."

"So 'tis then—as many an' old stone around may be the same for all we know. Some stand for graves an' sorrows, but so like as not others were put up for joy an' gladness. The 'old men' marked their good fortune by a stone, same as they Old Testament ones of valour an' renown. An' what was good then be good now, seeing as God knows no shadow of changing. Eh, Mary?"

"'Twas a comely thought, though I seem you've marked evil fortune, not good."

"Good it was, I hope and pray; yet I doan't know how 'twill fall out. Anyway, you maidens saved my life here, an' that was good fortune—saved it an' changed it. Afore that time I never so much as looked upon a bird's nest with understanding—blind I was, for all my eyes that could see at two miles."

"It have taught 'e the value of friendship, Nicholas."

"An' the meaning of—at least—there—why shouldn't I tell you rather than burst with it? You would under-

stand. Mary dear, I'll let you in a great secret if you like. I—I—yet what is it to you—me an' my secrets?"

"Anything that be great to you be great to me, Nicholas," she said, simply.

"Very kind I'm sure, an' very kind you always are to me—an' me a sad handful all them weeks, an' you quick as lightning with the thing in my thought afore I spoke—whether 'twas a drink, or a pipe, or a pillow. But the reason why I was always wool-gathering an' never no more grateful than a bird for crumbs was this, Mary. My mind was fast bound—hard and fast held to one face an' one voice all the time. Hannah Bradridge, Mary—Miss Hannah I should say if I was properly respectful—but silly words like that, even her own butivul name, be mere vexations when a man's falled in love with a woman. 'Tis just her an' me—two bits of living flesh an' blood—man an' maid; an' names is nought, an' families is nought, an' homes an' distance an' time an' all the rest of it is nought but contrivances to put between us. I want her. I love her cruel. My whole life an' soul be poured out for her. Nothing but she be real, even to the hills an' the river. I know 'tis mad to look so high, but I doan't care about that. She'm fit for a king's queen, yet I'm noways shamed of looking up at her; an' I be going to tell her I love her, though I might so well offer marriage to the moon. 'Twill be something if she'll let me love her at all—though God knows her own command couldn't prevent it. Now you see why Teddy says I'm gone weak in the head—as he told Trout to Two Bridges a few days since. I ban't mad—only drunk with love of that girl. But fair or foul her answer to me, this here will stand as a sign of what she is and what she did. . . . And you too, Mary," he added after a pause. "For while she bided, you ran quicker'n the river an' fetched help to me. In honesty these stones stand for you too, an' what you did that day."

Chill justice called this from him and Mary understood. She grew cold, then she flamed up suddenly to

think how far she had travelled in secret upon the road of dreams that this confession could thus hurt her heart. Here was the truth, indeed, and, with it, an end of her sunrise fancies and gloaming hopes.

"I—I—may it fall out as you wish," she said softly. "Pray God be good to the both of 'e, I'm sure."

"Thank you, Mary. It's a heartening thing to speak it into words as I have done to you. You an' Teddy be most like my own kindred, an' to tell you have made me hopefuller somehow. You'm her first friend, an' you know her better than I can. She's a holy angel to me, an' I've lived in a new world since I found her. But I can't go on like this—'tis ice an' red hot iron mixed. I've telled all this to the trees in the wood an' the water in the river. But you'll be dumb, same as them, won't 'e, my dear?"

His friendliness and easy endearments of word and tone sickened her. They marked a gulf of indifference deeper than contempt or hate. She shut her eyes and shivered a little, then made an effort and rose and smiled wanly at him.

"Now I must really be gone. An' I do hope for your happiness with all my heart—with all my heart I do."

"Stop a little longer. 'Tis good to uncork my thoughts to you an' let loose my mind. 'Tis a terrible great happening to a common man to fall in love. Why, if I had her—if every pulse of her was mine, an' her lovely body and brown hair, an' her voice to coo to me—God knows that God's self might sink to be second. There's fire raging inside me an' burrowing down into the depths of me. Love be a awful queer thing, Mary."

"I never knowed that men could get so fiery and feel so much," she answered. "'Twas the female's part to be lost in a man—so I thought."

"There's danger," he repeated, "but who made of good earth would be afear'd? Yet the Lord of the living might set His face against it."

"He went to a wedding feast, however. Of course

so much must have fallen to Him as was hidden from them who wrote about Him," said Mary, and Nicholas reflected on the obvious idea.

"'Tis a great thought," he said, "an' you'm a very clever woman to think it."

Then she rose and he accompanied her upon her way.

Presently he stopped a moment and looked down at his house, a mile distant and far below on the other bank of Dart. Upon the side of green Longaford it stood, a spot; and to the right, Wistman's naked forest spread like spiders' grey webs woven along the hills. Above, rising from wilderness of shattered granite, piled in heaps and flung to the four quarters in savage chaos, towered the conical head of the Tor; while aloft a clear sky already darkened to night.

"'Tis that as makes my heart sink, Mary," said the man pointing to his hut. "'Tis something too poor for my great love. My den be little better than a fox's burrow."

"Don't think it. Your den be the centre of the earth, an' the next place to heaven for her as loves you," she answered, looking down at the cabin with small, bright eyes.

"I could do much you know—yet if 'twas as grand as the Revelation, 'twouldn't be none too brave for the likes of she."

"The house don't count," answered Mary.

"I wish I could think that Hannah might take the same view, I'm sure; but 'tis quite too great a thing to hope. Now good-bye, my dear. You've done me a power o' good, but that is only to add to all I owe you already."

Then he left her on the high land above her home and returned to the warren.

CHAPTER XII

HANNAH DECIDES

TIMOTHY OLDREIVE permitted himself full measure of scorn and contempt when he occupied his mind with Edgecombe. 'Rival' he would not condescend to call him, for the word looked too large for the fact. That any real competition could obtain between himself and Nicholas he flouted as a thought absurd. But it pleased him to be deeply angered, to regard the warrener's proceeding as not merely unfriendly but most treacherous. That the warrener knew of his relations with Hannah, Oldreive was assured, because everybody knew them. Now he chose to be mightily aggrieved, for he had a wonderful faculty in that sort and could spin grievances out of nothing, as the invisible alchemy of sunshine on soaking moorland begets the gauze of mist under blue sky. He was not alarmed but greatly incensed. He debated for a week before taking a definite step, then, certain that he had but to ask to hear the word he wanted, the young farmer determined to take this plunge and engage himself to Hannah. That such a contract must carry with it many obligations he knew full well. Even his nebulous sense of right and vague notions of propriety told him that, once committed to marriage, his life must be mended, elevated and purified. He suspected that reformation would naturally follow upon an engagement. As a man above the average, he would make a husband above the average. Adequate preparations should not lack. Already he told himself that Hannah Bradridge was a fortunate woman.

But before this final action Timothy, content to pursue a course he believed common with all men, decided

that a final carouse was right and a last period of licence reasonable. He would have one concluding frolic in the dirt, then return to the serious business of life, tackle duty like a man, set his house in order, and presently make a pattern husband for Hannah Bradridge. Honestly, he loved her, and his passion, somewhat fitful until now, settled into a very steadfast flame before the first hint of rivalry. In love he was complacent, self-satisfied and blind, yet with a blindness quite different to Edgecombe's. Timothy saw his sweetheart on several occasions, enjoyed some lengthy and lonely walks and drives with her, greatly pleased her in some moods, jarred upon her not a little in others. He proceeded so far that Hannah was plunged into new mazes of doubt. She had thought that her mind was affirmed; now, before the farmer's gallantry, she began to hesitate again. He charmed her with his voice and his face, his implied possession and the subtle indication in his ideas that he was kneaded of a clay choicer than the other men she knew. Then, when she began to grow soft towards him, something would ring falsely as a crazed bell, and spoil the dream, and soil the rosy fabric of romance with a smudge—even as a fly settling upon a picture arrests illusion. Still his case was strong, though far from assured, as Timothy assumed when he went off once more to Plymouth.

"Gone again!" murmured Mr Chugg at the bar of the "Ring o' Bells."

"Ess, for two new ploughs an' a gert stock of oats," said Mrs Bradridge.

"Ban't to buy oats, but to sow 'em," declared the water-bailiff. "If you could chain the man on his land he might do some good by it, but as a free creature he ban't so much use to himself or the world as a donkey at grass."

"Us be going to chain him up soon, I hope," whispered Mrs Bradridge. "But keep the news to yourself, Chugg. My Hannah's pretty safe to be mistress at Cherrybrook afore the year's out."

"Aw! then 'twasn't all smoke an' no fire, as I thought an' hoped when I heard it? Wish I could give you joy; but I couldn't feel much worse if 'twas my own Jenny. However, if it have got to be, please God, your maiden will bring the man to his senses and hold him to his duty, as you say."

"She will; an' Oldreive be a better chap than you think, Merryweather."

"I hope so—he might be, an' still long ways short of a saint. I thought 'twas some man else wi' red hair—to name no names."

"Him! She'm too independent an' well brought up, I hope."

"Ban't always the poorest as comes to the union work-house, ma'am. Now I'm off; an' come what may, Hannah's a very good girl, an' I hope she'll be happy."

He departed, and this secret news changed Mr Chuggs's intention. Combining a private enterprise with his public business, the water-bailiff now ascended West Dart, studied the river with his accustomed care, and marked what was doing, then ascended the hill beyond Wistman's Wood to visit Edgecombe's retreat. The warrener was not at home, but guessing where he might be met with, Chugg breasted the hill, and presently found Nicholas and Teddy Merle busy with ferrets in a deep coomb on the north side of Longaford.

"Marnin', neighbour! Leg going on all right, I hope."

"'Tis well, an' scarce shorter than t'other by a thought. I can travel so easy as ever. Went ten miles essterday an' seed Hannah Bradridge to her home after; for I met her coming back from Postbridge."

"Ah, then, 'twill be no great matter for you to get so far as my house to Prince Hall on Sunday. I shall be glad to have a tell with 'e, if you'll drink a dish of tea along with us."

"Most pleased, I'm sure. I'll come across the Moor under Crockern."

Mr Chugg nodded and went on his way at once. He liked Nicholas, and pictured him as a very desirable son-in-law; but it was well for his plan that Merryweather gave the other no time for second thoughts. Hardly had the old man departed when Edgecombe regretted his promise. Sunday was the only day of leisure he enjoyed, and to go far from the "Ring o' Bells" during that holiday seemed an impossible thing to him.

As yet he had not taken fate in his hands and spoken. He put it off, in fear that the word, once uttered, must end all. Upon his chance meetings with Hannah he tried hard to see a little of her mind towards him, but failed to do so. For she was difficult to comprehend; she wavered and seemed within reach to-day; to-morrow she had retreated beyond the last resort of hope. Sometimes she was almost cool when unconsciously he troubled her by some error in his love-making.

Meantime the rabbit season drew to a close, and the tale was far short of the average account. Nicholas worked by day and night to make up the proper numbers for his master, and Hannah found that she could no more come between Edgecombe and his business than she could intervene between Timothy Oldreive and his pleasure. Yet the red man drew her surely, and satisfied her more completely than the farmer. Absence, although she was impatient of it, left no real mark upon her affection for him; whereas, in the case of Timothy, while he dreamed not of such danger, his chances were much discounted when his back was turned. Herein appeared a position natural enough, for Hannah knew what kept the one and the other from her.

Thus when, after a fortnight of tremendous toil, Nicholas slew rabbits enough to make up for his substitute's laziness, and related his achievement in Hannah's ear, she forgave his apparent indifference and lengthy absence; but when Oldreive wrote to say how

his week at Plymouth must be stretched to a fortnight, she was sceptical concerning his plea of much business. Mrs Bradridge's spirit grew uneasy before this protracted delay, and her daughter's heart daily hardened.

Then Timothy wrote again to declare that he was coming home, and the widow breathed more easily. But, on the day appointed, he did not return, and twenty-four hours later a letter was received from him that contained an excuse and another date some days later.

Betty, to whom this missive came, answered it without mincing language, and did not hesitate to paint in gloomy colours the danger of such procrastination. Thereupon Oldreive wrote to Hannah in lover's language, named the actual moment of his arrival at Princetown, and begged her to drive out with Mark Trout to meet him. "I've much to say, and shall put up for the night at the inn," he wrote; "and it will be like sunrise to see your dear face again. Now I have done with towns for ever—until you ask me to take you to one some day in the future."

This most calm appropriation, from one who had, as yet, done no more than ask her to think seriously about him, rather pleased Hannah. She reflected much upon Timothy's letter, and compared it to Edgecombe's; for Nicholas had also written laboured notes when he sent her golden plover by the hand of young Merle. Advantage of caligraphy rested with the farmer. Moreover, Hannah was sufficiently educated to perceive that the master of Cherrybrook could write pretty letters when he pleased. At last she found herself disposed to pardon even this most protracted visit to Plymouth; and, finally, in gracious mood, she determined to gratify Oldreive by granting his request. Such a concession need mean nothing, Hannah assured herself.

The day arrived, and Mark Trout gazed with admiration as Betty's daughter appeared in all the glory of a new straw hat and tan gloves. Such luxuries

took his breath away, for, to his mind, gloves always represented superfluous wealth.

"Too good a million times over for that lying, lust-ing rascal; an' if I could throw him out of the trap, an' break his neck coming down the hill, I'd be doing the world a service," he reflected; for Mr Trout was neither a forgiving nor forgetful man. He had not pardoned or put away Oldreive's insults of the past autumn.

Mrs Bradridge spoke to Hannah, as she mounted the market cart and prepared to set out.

"An' call at the chemist's for they peppermint things for mother, will 'e? An' mind you leave message at surgery that we shall be glad if Doctor Light will look in to-morrow when he can. Her's very queer, I do believe; so wapsy in her temper wi' everybody; an' can't let down her food nohow; an' her left hand be like a bit of dead wood. Please God her ban't going home, for what we should do without her sense, I can't think."

"Granny 'll mend—her often has her bad days, poor old dear. But I'll leave the message, an' get the peppermints, an' a tin o' that soup her liked so well afore."

Betty nodded, though a cloud still hung upon her face. Then Mark chirruped to the horse, and started at a gallop over the bridge. But he had scarcely passed Dart when Hannah's eyes noted a figure descending the steep hill from Princetown.

"Wait a minute," she said, and her heart beat strangely. "Theer's news coming. I see a boy from the telegraph office. Us'll wait, an' find out if 'tis for mother."

"Barely time for us to be upalong afore the train's due as it is," grumbled Mr Trout. "However," he added, not without malice, "perhaps my gentleman have changed his mind again."

Hannah tightened her lips, but made no answer. Then they returned to the door and waited for the messenger. He arrived, and his telegram proved to

be for the "Ring o' Bells." It was addressed to Mrs Bradridge, and now she hastened out and read it aloud.

"*'Detained—vital business—Back by mid-day train to-morrow. Oldreive.'*"

"What did I say?" asked Trout in surly triumph.

"You'd best to go all the same—for mother," said Betty.

But Hannah shook her head.

"Mark can go—no call for me to now."

"'Tis only one day more. He'll be here to-morrow," murmured her mother, trying to read disappointment in the girl's face, but finding no emotion of any sort displayed there. Yet, though her countenance showed no feeling, her answer did.

"To-morrow—to-morrow! To-morrow never comes."

She took off her gloves slowly and unpinned her new straw hat. She flung them on a table inside the dwelling-room, then picked up her sun-bonnet and returned to the door again.

"Where be going?" asked Mrs Bradridge, who was speaking gloomily to Trout.

"'Pon my own business," answered Hannah. "Doan't 'e forget the soup for granny, Mark. No call to stare so, mother; us have all got our business, I suppose. I was to have a holiday, an' I'll take it—to the right instead of the left."

She walked straight away without more words, entered the moor, and set her face toward Wistman's Wood.

"Not that way! For dear love doan't do it!" cried Betty after her; and Hannah heard and wondered that her mother should read her so clearly. In common with most grown-up people, she was convinced that her parent had no knowledge of her real character. She did not turn, she did not waver, but walked steadily forward. Her stride was slow but lengthy for a woman; and so she vanished, with a step as stately as her purpose was sure.

Mrs Bradridge gazed after her in deep misery.

"I knawed it! An' I know the rest," she thought. "She've flipped off red-hot to that damned vagabond; an' t'other have got nought but hisself to blame. Please God she won't find the man in her present mind; for if she do, she'll ax un to marry her so sure as Judgment Day; then all's over."

CHAPTER XIII

LONGAFORD TOR

FROM Two Bridges northward extends a line of little mountains into the moor, and upon Higher White Tor, the culminating peak of this brief chain, shall still be found some eight or nine megalithic fragments of an ancient trackway. From undulations of grass and heather upon its southern slopes the stones stretch aloft irregularly towards the crown of the tor; and Nicholas Edgecombe, when he tramped that way, would often of set purpose pursue this venerable road and speculate on what manner of men aforetime came and went here amid the unchanging hills. Those evidences of a vanished life about him had not escaped his intelligence; the barrows of the by-gone men were riddled with the burrows of his rabbits; ruined homes stood by each river; dead heroes slept under every lonely peak. Edgecombe, impressed with the infinite duration of the Bible chronicle, imagined that those who once inhabited the Moor must have lived as the tribes of Israel before bondage, and must have roamed here during the same period of the world's history. He set the prehistoric people alive again amidst their granite lodges, as he had conjured up the authentic figures of the New Testament; and, in the pervading atmosphere of a love that now quickened his understanding, he thought of the primeval moor folk as men of like joys and sorrows with himself. Everything bore upon his relations with Hannah Bradridge; and now, as he walked upward along the immemorial road, his mind was occupied only with her, and with the coming Sunday that was to see him speak.

Before turning homeward he had gone out of his way to mount Higher White and think awhile in the upper air it pierced. Beneath lay spread the warren, where Edgecombe had met Timothy Oldreive and taken away his gun. From that incident a series of circumstances led Nicholas directly to Hannah. He thought of her and of her alone, while mirrored in his unseeing eyes there extended an enormous scene that rolled in hills and swept in deep valleys every way to the horizon. From the crest where he stood the land fell abruptly to deep turfy hollows scattered with granite. Then, beneath a coat of sere grass, warm in tone against streaks and patches of snow, the slopes levelled gradually into great marshes, where water glimmered and acres of sedge, ruddy in death, brightened the basin of Cherrybrook with their prevailing hue. From these fens the plover called, and, rolling easterly, the huge bulk of Hameldon loomed along the sky with a darkness that was yet lighted in opposition to the westering sun. The furrowed face of it might be read like an open book, for its heather-clad and snow-clad bosom was a palimpsest, written and re-written, erased and corrected by Time and his children. Into the mists of the south this hill extended, and beyond it, sun-kissed and hazy, stole forth those remote ramparts of Dartmoor that face toward the sea. There Hey Tor, Saddle Tor and lofty Rippon lifted their heads, and, beyond them easterly, Buckland Beacon's abrupt descent marked the bed of Dart. Yar Tor and Bench Tor and Sharp Tor likewise appeared upon a nearer plane, for the air was crystal with unshed water, and all things were magnified by invisible moisture. Beneath his uplifted vantage ground the warrener beheld Bellaford and Laugh Tors, shrunk to molehills; then a pearly snake of light told of Cherrybrook's course, and, westerly, Holne Ridge and Avon Head and Cater's Beam glowed against the sky, mighty, mysterious, unbroken by any stone.

As the sun began to sink, all the earth was dipped in grey, and the ridges and hollows, where snow still

shone, gleamed ghostly, or glowed with faint rose while the sky awakened into evening splendour. Over the distant sea a nimbus of storm-cloud ascended upon the wind, and in the higher air, full of pure light above the sunset red and gold beneath, sped signs of change, where the whips of a great storm flung out their silver thongs before an aerial tempest that swept the upper chambers of the sky. Beneath, at earth level, soft breezes still blew, and in their fitful rise and lull, Edgecombe heard rivers crying of the rain.

Half a mile distant Longaford's strange mitre of earth and stone stood outlined, and, gazing thither, the warrener found his eye send a sudden message to his heart. A woman stood upon the apex of the tor and looked about her. At that distance she was little more than a dark speck crowning the elevation; yet Nicholas knew her well enough, for his sight had a long range. Now he leapt to his feet, shouldered his gun, and made haste to reach her.

He hoped with all his heart that she might be alone, and that the fateful hour was now thrust upon him without warning. As he approached, he saw that she observed him, and came down a little way and sat comfortably upon a stone to wait his arrival. But her panting bosom he did not see, the flutter at her heart he did not guess, as he swept towards her.

Already Hannah had visited the cottage by Wistman's Wood and found it empty. The door was only latched, and musing curiously that she probably stood upon the threshold of her future home, she was in a mind to enter. Yet thus to peep and pry during the master's absence seemed not good. She, therefore, turned from the little cot and climbed to the hill behind it. Upon this lofty spot he had seen her, and now, ascending the scarp of the tor, Edgecombe reached her side, where she sat in a natural chair of granite. The stone was furnished with soft mosses; grass and ferns grew in the clefts of it, and, rising upward like a sceptre, sprang a foxglove from the bygone summer. Now its seed-cones were

split and empty, yet the dead skeleton still stood. She did not rise as Nicholas reached her, but held out her hand to him, and he shook it warmly.

"A month of Sundays since I've seed 'e; and just as you was in my thoughts I lifted up my eyes an' found you in 'em! I hope you'm all well."

"I be well, but granny's poorly."

"Her's such an ancient piece now. An' whatever be you doing up here? Walking for pleasure?"

"Ess, I comed to see your cottage. I said I would some day."

He gulped down his emotion and grew hot. Then he sat near her feet, and turned and looked down at his home.

"To think o' that now!"

"I went to the door an' lifted the latch even. Then I thought you might be angered if I went in without you."

"'Twould be a differ'nt place like to me if I knowed you'd been over the draxel."

"Nicholas, I'll come over when you please."

He missed her real meaning, yet had wit to see a great opportunity here. From no familiarity with books, but out of an instinct to assume the humblest attitude that he knew before her, Edgecombe now turned to pray the supreme prayer. He knelt abruptly, clumsily. He clasped his red hands over his breast, and so appeared, staring before him, sprawling and ungainly. His eyes he kept upon her face, and the maiden's heart was moved at this cumbrous preparation.

"Hannah," he said, "men folk ban't their own masters afore the likes of you. I never dreamed of no female until I seed you. But now I'm that shaken that I want for you to marry me. I ax an' pray you to; an' no call to get in a rage, for I can't help axing more than I can help breathing. My blood burns me to the very eyeballs when my eyes are on you. I love you, an' God knows all that be summed up in the word when I say it."

She looked at him and felt a queen with life and

death in her hand. The sensation was not new, but it had been painful when her answer meant another's grief. Now, designing a different reply, delay was agreeable and delightful. She loved the man, even to his attitude—straddling humbly on his knees. She saw his deep chest lifting his hands up and down, and she liked to think that if she willed it, he would be claspng her to himself with a mighty hug. There was something feline in her eyes as she half closed them and purred a moment, then made answer.

"What nonsense all this is, Nicholas Edgecombe! An' the love of you summed up in that syllable—so you say yourself. Love—what is it? Can such a small word as love hold it? If I loved a man, I do think as Dartmoor wouldn't be big enough to compass my love. I'd want to work for him twenty-four hours a day; my joy would be to kiss his shadow an'—an'—I'd smother him with love—if I loved a man."

"You doan't then? At least not me? I ought to have known it. You'm built too tender. But—oh, Hannah, could 'e come to it presently? Do 'e think by any sort of road you could come to look at me as a husband for 'e? I reckon I be an anointed rascal even to ax such a thing—to dare—yet there 'tis: I've got to make the best I can of myself."

"I reckon your sort of love ban't built to last for life, Nicholas," Hannah said thoughtfully, hiding her enjoyment. "I'll grow old an' wrinkled some day. An' then?"

She revelled in this acting, but felt that she could not much longer hold out before his childlike misery.

"You grown old! Do the sun in heaven grow old, or the moon? I wish I had power of words. But there's nought to me to offer 'e but myself. Can't blow up my own trumpet even, for I haven't got a trumpet. My love for 'e be the whole of me—marrow an' bones an' all, my dear."

"Get up," she said, "an' sit along-side of me an' be sensible if you can. Why, man alive! 'tis you as be

too good for me, not me for you. What figure should I cut by such a God-fearing an' Bible-reading chap? You'm such a simple, natural fashion of fool that you only see my red mouth an' brown eyes. If my heart was naked, I lay you'd soon be thankful 'tween't yours. I ban't half you think me."

He rose and sat beside her, and she bent towards him and purposely breathed upon his cheek, to see how he would take it. He trembled a little, and turned and drew in a great breath through his nostrils, as though the air she had exhaled was life. He crossed his arms tightly to prevent them from going round her. Then temptation tugged at him and he started up and bent for his gun.

"Let me go," he said; "I'm only a man; I can't sit by you, an' touch you, an'——"

"You'll do as I bid, dear Nicholas," she answered quietly. "You'll just sit here, an' smother your fires down out of your sulky eyes, an' bide like a stone till doom—if I tell you to. Listen to me now, an' be gentle, not a savage wolf."

He obeyed and folded his arms again and looked at the world. Then the girl put her plump left hand upon his right and stroked the back of it.

"Stop!" he said. "I can't stand no more of this. I doan't understand you. Say 'no' an' let me go. I'm like a man full of gunpowder."

"The hair on your wrist is gold. How proud a woman would be to have a whole head of it! Why for did you ax me to say 'yes' if you're waiting here now to hear me say 'no?'"

He did not answer, and still she stroked his hand. Then the man's self-restraint came to a sudden end. Like a thunderbolt he fell upon her; his arms went round her; his tremendous caress made her gasp. The sunset earth outspread reeled and swam upwards as she closed her eyes, gave herself up to him, felt his fiery lips on her cheek and on her mouth. She lived a delicious age in that moment; then, too soon for her, he tore himself away and leapt to his feet.

"Theer!" he said, "if I'm damned for kissing you, I be. 'Tis your fault. I couldn't help it, an' if I hadn't done it, I'd have died. I don't ax you to forgive me; I don't care if you do or don't. I'll go. This is the greatest moment of all my life, an' now I'll go—I'll——"

"Bide one little minute," she said, and then, also standing up, went to him and put her hands on his shoulders and lifted her face to his and kissed him.

"There's one for all yours; an' I do wish you'd be more gentle to a poor maiden as cares for 'e. To be so rough to a woman! See, there's blood upon my chin where your bristles—An' hug me again, dear heart—hug me close, for I love e' to hurt me!"

Edgecombe fell back a step; he stared; he panted like a dog.

"You love me! God's goodness!"

With his woman won, the passion in him died instant death, and Hannah was astonished to find a stammering and humble reverence settle upon him. This tremendous discovery, that she really cared for him, almost struck the man dumb. The crown of love is worship; and now he adored and marvelled that he had dared to touch her.

"Forgive me—I'm only a wild beast, not fit to be your servant. But this! I'm dazed—I can't get hold of it—you'll take a man so humble an' meek as me?"

She dabbed her chin with her handkerchief.

"I love you, Nicholas—perhaps because you'm rough an' strong as a bear, so much as for better reason. But you'm good an' honest, I know; an' believe the Bible, an' go by it. I'm a woman none too happy, an' 'twould be peace an' pleasure to me to come to you, an' live along with you, an' gladden your days if I could, an' be happier for being your wife."

"Then we'm tokened," he said, and his voice was full of thankful awe; "actually tokened for marriage! Where's the words big enough to thank God? I don't know 'em. I can't even think 'tis true yet."

"You must trust your senses for it," she said. "Touch me, kiss me—I'm your own! An' I always liked you from the time I seed you so down-daunted 'pon Devil's Tor wi' your poor leg broke. I'll be a loving wife, my own dear, I promise that."

He could not speak, but he kissed her again, as an anchorite kisses a cross; and the devout chill of this embrace was not pleasant to Hannah.

"Now, 'tis only a question of time an' I'll come to 'e there in the li'l cottage," she said. "If I had only known, or guessed, or dreamed what was coming when I touched the latch an hour ago——"

She stopped, and her heart smote her that she could deceive him at such a moment. She had neither guessed nor dreamed, but well known what was coming when she turned her back upon her home and entered the Moor.

Nicholas did not speak immediately. He was looking down upon his house deep in thought.

"'Tis a poor place for such as you; but it shall be very vitty an' snug before you come to it, I promise you," he said at length.

"See me home now," she answered. "'Twill be dark afore I get there. My mother called after me as I started, and told me not to come this way. Old women see so deep into things; though 'tis first time my mother ever seed into me. I think she shadowed this in her busy mind."

"I do hope Mrs Bradridge won't be against me."

"Her was set upon another. You'd better know it now. She wanted me to marry Timothy Oldreive. Don't start an' stare; don't say a word about it—never, never! I'd rather the man's name didn't cross your lips. I be yours an' that's enough."

"Mine! As for him, I can only be sorry for him."

She was going to answer hotly with all that day's anger concentrated into a few bitter words. But she abstained, suffered her temper to evaporate gently in a sigh, and put her hand into the hand of Nicholas.

"Now we will go. I shall love this here little mossy chair on Longaford all my days, Nick!"

"An' me too. 'Twould be hard for me to live very far away from it henceforth I do think."

"Yet, by the time things be better, an' we get down to the country to live, an' you find a good job as head gamekeeper somewheres, as you always hope, perhaps we shall both have lost our love for this place, an' curse it instead of bless it."

"Us knows better than that I reckon!" he answered her, and together they descended the height and walked towards Two Bridges.

Now they began to grow nervous of each other, fell into a great silence, and so travelled two miles.

Then suddenly Nicholas spoke.

"I know where white heather grows. I'll get a bunch for 'e come summer. Luck goes with it according to the old saying. It shall be my first gift to 'e."

She laughed.

"Your first gift was to bring blood upon my face."

"To think o' scratching your butivul cheek so soft as curds—an' you could forgive me!"

She mused upon her past sensations and his outburst. Then, in the gloaming, they entered the "Ring o' Bells" together.

The bar was dark and empty, save for one woman's figure, crouched up with knees on elbows and face on hands beside the hearth.

"Mother!" cried Hannah, astonished at a sight so strange. "You sitting by the fire doing nought! Wonders never cease."

Mrs Bradridge got up, and they saw that she was deeply agitated. Her eyes were red; her voice told of tears. Then fell the rude clash of sorrow upon joy, and the lovers found their halcyon hour darkened and chilled by an abiding grief. To Hannah the incongruity of such dissonant emotions came as a new experience, and held an omen of ill; to the man this bad news brought regret indeed, but no cloud could dim the joy of that supreme day; while to Betty Bradridge, who instantly discerned the significance of Edgcombe's presence, and had indeed expected as

much, there was in this evil no opposition of happiness and misfortune, but merely accumulation of trouble.

"Mother dear, we'm tokened—Nicholas an' me. But you'm sad by the looks of it. What's hurt 'e? Shall Nick go?"

"Go? Ess—go to the Dowl for all I care!" said Mrs Bradridge unsteadily. "One sorrow never walks single. Ban't no time for tomfoolery now. Darter an' mother both took from me in a day. Well you may stare. Her's dead—dead—called your name—cried out for 'e proper—last word she spoke; an' you in this man's arms no doubt."

"Gran'mother dead! Not dead?"

"Death clipped her here while my back was turned. Her would come down an' sit in her place; an' I put her in her chair an' went about the whole work of the house—you being away playing with this red vagabond. An' when I comed in with the peppermint—my God!—poor old dear—her'd fallen 'pon the red hot peat, an' her arm was scorched to the shoulder. Her weern't gone then, but wi'in half an hour—ages afore doctor could come—she was out of it. Just sighed away her life, like the wind in the chimney. An' your name last upon her lips."

Hannah sat down and began to cry silently.

"Go!" said her mother, turning on Nicholas with a voice full of bitterness. "This ban't no place for you. Fed an' housed an' waited on, hand an' foot, for this: you steal the only thing a poor woman's got that be worth stealing. But you'd best to put such wicked nonsense out of your head, for have her you never shall if I can stop it. No good will come of it—her making eyes at you an' her old granny dying by inches. Wisdom be took from us, an' we'm like lonely birds, an' God knows how we'll fare without her."

Edgecombe was about to answer, but changed his mind, and, with one glance at Hannah, walked silently away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SPRING RAIN

THAT night the prophecies of sunset and the prediction of the river were made good. Long periods of low temperature and of thin snow showers from the north came to an end. The clouds that had spread in lurid glory under the setting sun advanced darkly, laden with rain from the sea, and where they met night, a mildness as of spring leapt along the uplands and valleys. The wind blew a gale, and at dawn came torrential rain that grew from strength to strength, and fell without ceasing for two days and nights. It swallowed the snow, thawed the deeply-frozen hills, released life from the shackles of vanished winter, opened the water-springs, and set Dart roaring in flood, as the freshets swept to her from a hundred hills.

Some days later, upon a Sunday, while still the sky wept at intervals, and a thick curtain of grey had settled down impenetrably upon the high lands, Sorrow Scobhull drank tea at the cottage of the water-bailiff, and Jenny Chugg ministered to him. There came a moment when Mrs Chugg went to the fowl-house, and called to Merryweather that he might come and set two rat traps, where she desired them. Scobhull thus found himself alone with the girl; and at that instant one wan ray of western sunlight, soaked in moisture, winnowed the clouds, and stole like a ghost along the moor. The watery gleam inspired Scobhull, and he determined to take his opportunity. Recently good fortune had come to him, and upon the strength of it he was anxious to ask Jenny to be his wife.

Now he sat silent to gather his ideas, and the girl prattled on, seeking to cheer him from his usual melancholy abstraction.

Suddenly he burst out :

"'Tis best to put the worst first an' get it off the mind. Then, when a body's chewed over the black side of anything, they can look at t'other, and judge whether the game be worth the cannell. So I'll tell you plain, Jenny Chugg, that ever since I comed to years of understanding, it have been borne in upon me I shall be drowned in Dart, same as my faither was. I might even go as he did, on the night you was having your first child."

Jenny's eyes grew round.

"What ever be you coming to, Mr Scobhull?" she asked.

"Call me 'Sorrow,' will 'e? Ban't a very gay name, but such as 'tis, I'd thank you kindly to call me by it. Well, that's the worst I've got against myself. The best is that I'm a man never yet known to drink too much, an' do rarely use a crooked word. Also I've just got lifted up in the land, for Farmer Oldreive, to Cherry-brook, have took me from stone-breaking to be at his place instead of William Lawrence, as squints, so that he can't plough true for a kingdom. An' I be gwaine to have three crowns a week."

"That's brave news, I'm sure, an' very glad I am ; an' I do think your name should be Joy, 'stead o' the wisht word it is."

"You might change my nature, though not my baptism name. In fact, I was going to ax ; only I'm so poor at speech, an' worse still at writing."

"I'm sure you have a very pleasant way with you when you mind to show it."

He rolled his eyes helplessly, scratched in his thin beard, and cast about how to continue. There was a moment of silence, during which from far off at Prince Hall, the cry of a peacock sounded through the open window, The noise suggested an image of the bird, and through it some line of approach.

"Have 'e ever seed that gert gawdy fowl as be screeching down along make love to his lady?" he asked abruptly.

"Can't say I have," answered Miss Chugg.

"Well, I feel same as him in his high moments when I look at you, Jenny. He sticks his wonnerful gert tail around about un, so full of eyes as they four Bible beasts; an' he bows down afore her an' trembles to his toe-nails, till every shining quill do shiver an' rattle like hail on a slate roof. Never was such wonnerful love-making under the sun I reckon. An' so 'tis with me, though I'm only a drab twoad of a chap, without no shining tail nor nothing. Yet do I cream an' curdle an' turn cold to my very leg bones when I touches your hand, Jenny Chugg. An' my eyes goes into water when they see you coming, until you'm all of a blotch. 'Tis my great deep love for 'e. Yet no doubt I'm too rash to mention it. Yet man wasn't meant to live alone neither. An' I named the fifteen shilling a week I think."

He twirled his soft black Sunday hat and round and round and felt relief in that this matter, so far as he was concerned, had ended. There was a little hope in him, but he hid it. Now, Scobhull wiped his forehead and looked every way but at his companion. As for the girl, she was still very young, and had never been courted before. In Edgecombe's eyes, she had appeared a little child, and he had angered her a good deal by guessing her age to be fifteen. This man, at least, knew that she was a woman—so she told herself. She took a long breath now, and tried to plump herself out, that her slim lines might bulk more generously upon Sorrow's sight. She felt very important; and the sense of this great added dignity served not a little to lessen her present regret at the disappointment of the labourer.

"'Tis very nice of you," she answered, blushing, and only with an effort keeping her mouth from a smile of pride; "but I doan't feel drawed myself, though fine an' proud to think that a growed-up man like you should care for me so much. An' I do hope you'll

find the right maiden in fulness of time, Mr Scobhull ; an' I do hope, likewise, you'll keep out of the river ; for there's no good reason why you should fall in more'n any other."

"You won't have me? Well, 'tis a very great blow to me, though, as a just man, why you should have had me, I can't say—me being a cheerless person, and not much given to laughing—an' less than ever now. I thought, perhaps, such good wages—but if the chap's no use, money won't better him."

"You'm every use—most useful man in these parts, my faither always says."

Mr Scobhull rose and put on his hat.

"Well, I'll get upon the road, for I'm feeling most too sheepish an' chapfallen to meet your parents' eyes. An' I'm very sorry I've troubled 'e, but 'twas my manhood called me to speak."

"No trouble at all—a pleasure," said Jenny warmly. "At least, I mean—I don't mean——"

"I know, I know. To make me sad weren't a pleasure. Anyway, I wish you what you wished me: a good partner, an' worthy of such a butivul young woman. Now, I'll say 'good evening'; an' no offence taken, I hope."

"None at all—quite the contrary, I'm sure," said Jenny, as the man tramped slowly away to Two Bridges. She waited only until his footfall died, then rushed, all excitement, to tell her mother.

"An' that do show I'm not a chit no more," she said, with exultation ; "an' if the wrong man can see I'm wife-old, what's to hinder the right one doing the same?"

As Scobhull, with listless steps and toes turned out ungainly, pursued the straight white road, a man of stronger gait and longer stride overtook him and bid him welcome.

"Same to you, warrener," he answered. "You'm going clever again, seemingly, an' I'm very glad 'tis so."

"Never better. I could fly a'most o' late days, I

think. Be just come from Ashburton. Got a lift out this morning, but walked every mile of the twelve back again. Miles be no mor'n yards, if your heart's light."

Mr Scobhull sighed.

"Happiness and trouble be always rubbing shoulders," he said, reflecting upon his reverse.

"So they be, sure enough. I'm in a fever of joy, 'cause I be going to marry Hannah Bradridge come presently; and yet this here nosegay will lie on a coffin to-morrow. I've got a friend to Ashburton as grows things under glass for market, an' these Lent rosen cost but threepence, though they'm afore their time. 'Tis wonnerful what a house of glass between a plant an' the sun will do to draw it forward."

"Falled in the fire she did," said Scobhull moodily. "A thousand pities her didn't fall in the water. All one to her, poor old blid, an' 'twould have been great peace of mind to me."

"Same old story!"

The thunder of the river swept to them from the marshes upon their left hand.

"I've knowed Dart was coming down these many days. Heard the Broadstones calling by night for a week. Hark!"

He stood and made the other stand.

"Did 'e ever hear a hungry, cruel voice plainer? Look at her—the snake—greedy as the grave—a grave herself for that matter—an empty grave this two year now, an' growing savage at her emptiness.

' Dart, Dart,
Wants a heart !'

You can hear the words."

Nicholas expostulated with good humour.

"You'm a very foolish man; an' you'll let that river run through your head till it have washed your brains away if you don't check it."

"Brains an' body an' soul, for all I know, though I hope there's no drowning an immortal soul."

For a moment neither spoke, then Scobhull burst out angrily—

"Do make me wild the little store you fools set by it. There's a Prince of the Power o' the Air, ban't there?"

"Certainly," answered Nicholas. "He'm named in the New Testament of the Bible, an' nobody who lives on Dartmoor can doubt it."

"Then why for not a Prince of the Power o' the Water? An' so there be, an' her name be Dart—a born she-devil to the last bubble of her."

"The Devil hates cold water worse than you do, my son. I've always heard 'twas good against un, inside an' out. An' surely the Prince of Life be stronger than the power of air an' water—or hell's own fire for that matter? You'm daft to sweat day an' night at the call of a natural river. Sure, to me it is a friend with the voice of a friend. Doan't know how I'd stand the silence as sometimes fall on the earth up my way, without Dart to break it."

"You! what do you know 'bout her? What do any man know but me? Have you worn out your eyes peer-ing by the hour into her deeps? Have you sat from morn till owl-light where a man was drownded in her, an' watched her teeth an' seed the water speaking to the stone? Her's gone without a human life for two years. An' that's greater magic than any in the Bible. Else why for have the blasted thing been suffered to swallow an honest man or woman year in year out as long as the memory of man?"

"'Tis only a vain saying that it does," answered Nicholas. Then he broke off and chuckled as he spoke. "Why doan't 'e larn for to swim? Then he could laugh at un."

"Swim!" said Sorrow Scobhull with great contempt. "Be I fish that I should go naked into cold water! I reckon Dart would damn soon larn me something different than swimming if I gived her a chance to. No man can escape his doom by swimming, nor flying neither; an' I shake to hear you laugh at the river within hearing of it. 'Tis a foolish act."

"Well, well, we must go our own way. Here's the 'Ring.' Come in and have a drop of drink."

But Scobhull shook his head.

"Not while old woman's still under the roof," he said.

"You're right. 'Tis more respectful I'm sure," admitted Nicholas.

Then they parted, and the warrener, entering, sought Hannah.

She came to him presently in an old black dress too small for her.

"Doan't look at me," she said. "My new black comes to-morrow. This be what I put on for faither afore I was growed up."

"Might set these flowers 'pon the coffin," he said "I've fetched 'em from Ashburton. Poor old lady—very kind to me she was when I bided here."

"Granny always thought well of you, Nicholas. She's gone at an unkind moment for us. She might have made mother more softer and more sensible."

"Have your mother spoke about it?"

"Nothing very nice to hear. But she'm all on wires just now. She won't come to her senses till after the funeral. She can't sleep nor eat, an' I'm sure she doan't rightly know what a deal of brandy she'm drinking lately."

"To keep up her nature no doubt."

"Funeral moves at nine o'clock sharp. Her wish was to lie along with gran'faither at Buckfastleigh. She was a Bradridge maiden an' very glad when mother married back again into the family."

"I can't do anything?"

"Nothing; an' you'd best to go now. I'll see the flowers do lie on her, but mother mustn't know where they came from."

The words reminded him and he took a sheet of paper out of his pocket.

"I've blacked the edges round with ink an' set my name in the midst with 'sorrow an' regret'; but better I tear it up if 'twill worrit her. Or perhaps

you might drop it in the grave after your mother have had her last look?"

"I will if I can."

"Would you give a kiss afore I go, or is it the wrong time just now?" he asked simply.

"No harm in that," she said, "but do it quiet."

CHAPTER XV

OLDREIVE'S PLAN

THERE came a day, one month after Mrs Sage had departed, when the breath of spring touched Dartmoor ; when green blades pushed through the char and rack of the firings ; when the leaf-buds on Wistman's oaks swelled and their stipules paled from cinnamon to amber ; when the greater gorse lighted its lamps for the bee ; when heath larks shrilled their sweet song again.

Edgecombe's period of comparative leisure had come, and now his concern was to preserve life rather than to take it. To-day Hannah was to drink tea with him, see the interior of his cottage for the first time and examine its possibilities. As she approached by the stony path over the moor, Teddy Merle passed her and regarded her moodily when she bade him "Good-day." His newly-born dislike amused her, and she stopped to speak to the boy.

"I judge that great frown means we'm not such friends as once we was, Teddy? But I think I guess how 'tis. I've put your nose out of joint with your hero up there. Well, he'm my hero too now."

Teddy looked suspicious and doubtful.

"Edgecombe has just packed me off," he answered, "because he seed you coming. First time as ever he told me to go; an' your fault, though you'll never be to him what I have been; an' you can't be, 'cause you'm only a female."

"An' just because of that perhaps I can be more to him than you, here an' there."

"You—you can't be nothing but his wife," said the boy contemptuously. "What's that beside what I've

done for un all this time? Teeled his traps, minded his dog an' broke in a new one, carried his rabbits, shot twenty-three crows, drove the cart to an' from Two Bridges, looked after his place when he was ill, an' a score o' things. You ain't got the strength, let alone cleverness. An' now, cause he'm going to drink tea with you, I've got to go."

"Come back along with me, then."

"Not likely! He sent me going. I wish to God he'd never broke his leg. Ever since all you women went messing about around him, he'm a changed man. If I smashed myself, I wouldn't let nobody come in the room but mother."

"You wait till you do smash yourself."

Teddy sniffed and the woman perceived that this matter was much at his heart.

"I've done with un—being ordered off like a dog. I'll never go near the man again till he axes me to. Then he'll see who's most use—you, as takes him from his work, or me, as helps him with it."

The woman laughed but did not answer; the boy scowled and went on his way. Fifty yards off he turned and shouted in a passionate treble:

"Why didn't you keep to your first mind and marry 'tother, an' leave Nick alone? I wish to Christ you had, anyhow!"

Hannah ignored this attack, though her breath came quickly and her colour rose. It seemed to her that Mary Merle and not her brother had spoken. Such emotion belonged to a woman rather than a man; and it was indeed so, for the jealousy of boys is often more feminine than masculine in its character. Accident, as with Teddy, may awaken this passion, and it perishes upon adolescence.

From Mary Merle Hannah fell to thinking of him whose existence the youth had hurled thus roughly at her. Timothy Oldreive was home again, had seen Mrs Bradridge and learnt the news of her daughter's engagement; but he had not sought Hannah, nor communicated with her. The matter weighed a little upon

her mind, and her love for Nicholas did not lessen a certain mental uneasiness when she considered Timothy. Yet her answer to his sustained procrastination seemed right and just; she was thankful that she had taken the step. Hannah trusted that he would hold aloof long enough for his rumoured rage to vanish and her discomfort to subside. Already she believed that complete indifference gained upon her; and she hoped that it might soon be so with him. From the standpoint of her new happiness she found it in her heart to be sorry for his sorrow, even as Edgecombe pitied Timothy when first he heard, on the day of his engagement to Hannah, that the master of Cherrybrook Farm had also cared for her.

Hannah now loved the warrener dearly and with increasing love. He satisfied her womanhood and her vague sense of the spirit within her. He responded as best he could to her ideals and to her misty but sincere affection for the theatre of their existence. Her life united to his own promised abundant joy for both of them. Through the environment of their love they walked together and blessed the coming spring and found all things good. Hannah accompanied Edgecombe to his work and learned the details of it. She dearly liked to feel his arm about her, and his strength, as he lifted her over streamlet and bog at the least pretended fear of wet shoes.

None of the vulgar and unclean conventions of a higher society kept them apart, or stood between them and natural seeking of each other; but Mrs Sage's death had upset her daughter seriously, and for a time Hannah, upon whom much devolved, found little leisure for love-making save short hours snatched as best they might be. Not until the present, and then to the openly expressed annoyance of Betty, had she visited Nicholas in his home. And now, as each step brought her nearer to the wooden house, she dreamed with gladness of life spent here in this loneliness and silence. The dwarf oaks would share her solitary hours; the river would speak to her.

"To dwell beyond the smell of beer," she thought; "what a happy change for me!"

Nicholas met her at the door and proudly bid her enter. He had been at great pains to make the place clean and sweet and tidy; to his eye, indeed, the cabin had never appeared so neat and orderly since he entered it. But Hannah exclaimed at the horrible chaos, and refused to eat or drink until a clean sweep was made of all the things upon the table. A dead black rabbit that Nicholas had unfortunately overlooked was removed into the air.

"They'm uncommon," he said, "I caught it a week since, an' I've bought it from Mr Snow, an' I be going to make a purse out of his flax for 'e."

But the woman paid no attention. She was peeping and peering everywhere with frank curiosity. Active ideas awoke in her mind and she planned the proper use and application of every corner in the little rooms.

"There'll be a terrible deal to do afore I can come to 'e," she said.

Edgecombe's face fell, for he hoped that she was going to express pleasure.

"Yes, yes—a terrible lot. But don't 'e like it?"

"'Tis a nice li'l cubby hole, when you get used to it, an' us'll be so snug as birds in a nest," declared Hannah. "I do like it, but I wants it to ourselves, my dear man. I ban't going to share it with traps an' gunpowder an' smelling leather an rabbit-skins an' Lord knows what beside. You'll have to build a place away from the house for all your nets an' dirt an' rubbish. My kitchen won't hold 'em an' me too, I promise you."

"'Tis a butivul thing to hear you call it your kitchen," answered he; "an' a very good thought to build a bit of a shed presently right away from the house."

"Do the stove smoke? I seem by thicky dark places each side of the mantelshelf that it do."

"Well, you might say it did, perhaps, though with my pipe alight I can't say as 'tis any trouble to me."

"But I don't smoke a pipe, you see."

Nicholas roared at this great jest.

"Bless your eyes, you shall if you mind to."

"An' my kisses go beggin'? You'll have to mend the chimney."

"I'll put a cowl to it. When the wind comes from the north the thing smokes, I grant—no other time."

"That's the wind that brings the snow. Do 'e find it bitter cold winter time, Nick?"

"Can't say as I do."

"An' if us was snowed up in a blizzard?"

He laughed.

"'Twould be a funny blizzard as kept me from getting down to the inn if you was hungry."

"Men quite so strong as you have been frozen to death in them, however. But we shan't bide here for all time."

"You don't like it," he said shortly.

"I love it, because I love you, my dear heart. Us'll be a happy couple—along wi' the coneys."

He poured out her tea and she praised his baking, for hot currant bread awaited her. Then they ate and drank, and looked at each other over steaming saucers and clasped hands many times during the progress of the meal.

Nicholas fell in with most of Hannah's ideas, promised to do what she desired if he felt that it could be done, and presently bore her company homewards. She talked him into a firm belief that she was really pleased. From doubt he came steadfastly to trust her assurances of delight at the cottage. And her declaration was genuine, for though a fear first crossed her mind at sight of the extreme smallness of the twin rooms, Edgecombe's promise to build a separate shed for the implements of his trade relieved her.

Elsewhere Hannah Bradridge and her arrangements for future happiness occupied another man and woman. Soon after she left the "Ring o' Bells," Timothy Oldreive had ridden into the yard. By chance he observed her walking over the Moor towards Wistman's Wood, and he took his opportunity to get speech with her mother. He gave his horse to Mark Trout, then entered the inn and met Mrs Bradridge.

They had already discussed the matter, even to bitterness, for Betty declared the whole misfortune due to Oldreive's irregularity, and explained how Hannah was actually starting to meet him when his fateful message hardened her heart and set her face straight-way towards the other man. Upon this Timothy lied as to the facts, built up a mountain of grievance on Hannah's lack of trust, and explained how a bracelet for her had kept him in Plymouth until it should be adorned with her initials.

Now they met again, and the woman, still unnerved and physically enfeebled by tears shed for various reasons, asked Timothy what next he designed to do.

"Anything but sit down under this," he answered. "The man has chosen to make himself my deadly enemy—so be it. Now I know, I can act. I ignore this so-called engagement, and I deny that Hannah could really choose wrong between me and a common labourer. I know what has happened very well: he's told her a pack of lies about me and the past—he's invented wicked falsehoods to turn her against me and poison her mind. 'Twasn't that telegram at all. This mischief was done before. She's poisoned, I tell you; and now I'm going to draw the poison out and open her eyes my own way. We'll see who's the stronger man."

"Meantime less said the better, I suppose," answered Mrs Bradridge. "Go your way, but hold in your thoughts and don't hint at your actions to anybody. 'Tis the telling often makes more trouble than the doing."

"That's wise advice," he said. "But no need to advise me. You keep a still tongue likewise. He worked against me in the dark. I'll treat him the same way. To wait till my back was turned! Because he hadn't the courage to come to my face, but must try and fox her away in secret."

"Us mustn't grant that he have foxed her away. Us mustn't think this the end of it."

"No, by God! Only the beginning. Hannah will

be my wife yet—or, well—not that man's while I'm above ground. He'll be sorry he was born before I've done with him. But give me time, and don't name my name to your daughter. Leave her to him; let her learn to see through him; let her understand the manner of life that's waiting for her in that den among the rocks. To offer such a hole to a woman! I wouldn't give it to my dogs for a kennel."

"She may weary of him of course."

"She will; and it's your part to help her to."

"As for that the less I say the better. You know her nature. I've stormed and swore, but 'twas foolishness; I've wept, but 'twas tears wasted. Now I'll shut up an' tire her out with silence: the man shall never be on my lips no more. I'll show that his goings an' comings be nothing to me."

Timothy nodded.

"Best way not to mention him. She'll be sick of him before the summer's over, when she never hears his name on a decent pair of lips."

"I see—may turn people against un."

"No need to put it so. Tell the truth about him, or nothing. To think! For a Bradridge of Buckfastleigh to marry a rabbit-catcher! A frightful come down."

"It mustn't be—it shan't be."

"Never—trust me for that. Presently I'll meet Hannah, when she's out of his way, and have a talk with her. Be sure you don't let her know the rage I was in. She mustn't guess until after."

"I'll cabal against him every way I can, I'm sure," declared Mrs Bradridge gloomily.

But Timothy pursued his own thoughts.

"No, she mustn't hear how this has torn me to pieces till I've got her again—got her for good and all. Do you know what was the last thing I bought in Plymouth?"

The other shook her head, and, with a laugh, Oldreive took a little jeweller's case out of his pocket, opened it and revealed a ring. In a gold

setting appeared a very pale sapphire and two small pearls.

"Aw jimmery!" cried Betty. "They'm precious stones, ban't 'em?"

"They are," admitted Timothy. "That was the engagement ring."

For the moment the woman in Mrs Bradridge sharpened her tongue, even against her ally. That a man should purchase such a trinket was of course unusual in their rank of life; but Betty understood the significance of it, and perceived that by thus purchasing the token before he had won the girl, Oldreive insulted all maidens soever.

"You counted your chicks 'fore they was hatched, then?"

He frowned fiercely and snapped the cheap trinket into its case.

"If you want to quarrel too——"

"Not me. Only you looked a thought too far ahead of facts, that's all."

"I did not. I know what I'm about always. That ring will go on your daughter's hand—not so quick as I expected though. Before God I swear I'll marry her, so you can rest quite easy there. No man yet ever turned me from my purpose; and you can take your oath no woman will."

"I hope you'm right. But don't loose your passion, for that won't help matters."

"I know when to loose my passion and when to hold it in," said Timothy Oldreive. "So now we know where we stand. Just let things slide. Time must pass before she's ready to hearken to me. Wait and see the ring with sapphires and pearls in it that he'll buy her!"

He talked a while longer in this strain, then returned to the stable, mounted his horse and rode upon his business.

"If anything on earth could make me know he was in deadly earnest, 'tis that he forgot to have a drink afore he went off," reflected Mrs Bradridge. "So evil

cuts every way—even into my custom ; which would be the worst evil of the lot.”

She reviewed her own position and determined that an attitude of dogged silence and contempt must best serve to shake Hannah from her present infatuation.

CHAPTER XVI

A DEPUTATION

THERE came a night in March when unusual stir and bustle marked the bar of the "Ring o' Bells." Men nodded with significance, whispered behind their hands and gave other indications of some uncommon matter in their thoughts. But what seemed remarkable was the ignorance of the hostess as to the pending revelation. Mrs Bradridge glanced this way and that and strained her ears to catch some leading utterance, but she could not. The mystery grew, and meanwhile, before the moment for its elucidation, another topic occupied the company.

In a corner Axworthy was discoursing to Scobhull concerning Timothy Oldreive.

"His rage be all banked up in him, so William Lawrence says. 'Twas dreadful when he first came home an' heard what she'd done. Breathed forth fire a'most. I tell you because you'm going to work for him next week. Best be on guard against his awful temper. He'll come at 'e, so Lawrence says, all of a sudden on the wings of a whirlwind."

But Scobhull was not impressed.

"You won't scare me with that stuff. Ban't the truth neither. For why? 'Tis' only God A'mighty can go 'pon the whirlwind—too uneasy travellin' for a human, I reckon."

"An' come to think of it," commented Mr Chugg, who had just arrived; "come to think of it, the Lord do want a quick coach now-a-days. No rest for the Everlasting, that's certain."

Sorrow Scobhull, who loved such a problem, forgot the matter in hand before this larger theme.

"'Tis chiefly because the earth be round," he said.

"If 'twas flat 'twould be an easier task for the Almighty Eye to take it in. But a round world—I can't for my part guess how 'tis done."

"He can see all round a thing, as be well known," declared Nicholas Edgecombe, who was present.

"No doubt; but even to Him, one job comes stiffer than another, I judge," asserted the water-bailiff. "An' why for He made the place such a difficult shape, only He knows."

Then Mr Chugg broke off suddenly, scanned the company, and counted upon the fingers and thumb of his hand as he did so.

"Be us all here?" he asked.

"All but Trout hisself," answered Axworthy.

"Well, us can do very well without him; an' I told the man to his face 'twasn't decent his coming. But come he would, for where there's no proper feeling, you can't put it in."

"What's all this mystery, Merryweather Chugg?" asked Mrs Bradridge sharply. "Such goings on I never have seen. Every silly fool among you winking an' nodding an' carrying on as if he was busting with some wonnerful news."

At this point Mr Trout arrived very short of breath.

"Haven't begun, I hope," he said in a stage whisper. "My missis wanted to come cruel, but I wouldn't let her. Wouldn't be seemly, an' her so far gone too."

"Pity you didn't bide with her. 'Tis very ill-convenient your being here," said Mr Vosper brusquely. The head man of Bray Farm seldom honoured Betty's bar, and his presence alone filled her with curiosity.

Then Mr Chugg spoke in a loud voice.

"You chaps, keep 'pon that side of the room, an' the deputation will stand by the fire. Come this way, Mr Vosper, please; an' you, Edgecombe, an' Axworthy, an' Sorrow Scobhull."

"A deputation to you, Mrs Bradridge," said Vosper, calmly. "An' we hopes you'll take it in good part an' not give us our trouble for nought."

Betty gazed with astonishment at the five men.

"What an upstore! You might think I was Queen of England. Say what you've got to say smart then. You'm keeping the fire off the company."

Chugg and Vosper spoke aside for a moment. Then the latter had his way and Merryweather broke the matter.

"'Tis touching this here man," he began, pointing with his thumb to Trout, whereupon all eyes regarded the ostler with interest but no emotion.

"He've got ten childer an' another coming—not six weeks off by all accounts; an' us wants to point out with all respects an' admiration for you, Mrs Bradridge, that fifteen shillings a week, handsome though it may be for such a man as Mark Trout, ban't enough to keep him an' twelve other mouths. This here deputation do feel more for his wife than him, an', to tell truth, we'm very sorry to think that she have got to be so busy on such a little money. An' so we make bold to ax you to put half a crown 'pon his wages. An' we trust to your knowed character for goodness. An' now Mr Vosper of Bray Farm will say a word."

"Can't tell no better than what you have, water-bailiff," declared the other promptly. "Half-a-crown will buy a lot of bread an' milk, an' 'twill help Mrs Trout's peace of mind an' lighten her coming trouble. An' the man says that he'll work extra for it; an' he'll give Jane Wood, your maid, a hand at scouring the pots—which asks for a man's strength to do it vitty. So I'm sure I hope you'll see your way, ma'am."

"Have any more of 'e got anything to add?" inquired Betty; "because I'd like to hear the lot of 'e afore I tells a bit myself."

"Now have your say, Nicholas Edgecombe," prompted Mr Chugg.

Nicholas felt very nervous, for public speaking was a new experience to him. He thanked his good fortune that Hannah was not by.

"Well, us all be men as works for wages here, an' us all knows how far a shilling goes; an' us all knows how far fifteen shilling goes. Not far I reckon in

Trout's family. 'Twould be fair give an' take if he's willing to do more work for the rise. An' he've promised to throw in his eldest son—as be nearly ten year old, an' strong for his years, an' quite able to shift muck in the stable. That would give his faither more time to clean pots. An'—we'm very hopeful of your known kindness—the deputation I mean. So I'll speak no more—except that the Lord says, 'the labourer be worthy of his hire.'"

Mrs Bradridge scowled, then remembered her promise to Timothy Oldreive and laughed scornfully.

"You'm a slight reed for a deputation, whether or no," she answered acidly. "You'd spoil anything with your silly prattle—like a gert babby talking!"

The man grew fiery at this insult, looked at Chugg and shook his head regretfully. He had begged to be excused from the enterprise, but his friend would not respect the reason, and refused to believe that Mrs Bradridge really bore the warrener any particular ill-will. Now he perceived his mistake. He nodded back. He was heartily sorry for Edgecombe, and felt some anger against Betty. The undertaking looked by no means hopeful; and Mr Trout knew it and regarded Nicholas without friendship.

"Now have you done, or do you want to speak, Axworthy?" inquired the hostess, with increasing asperity.

"No, I don't," said Mr Axworthy. "I'm only here because Mr Chugg axed me to come—on general principles, being a radical in politics, but friendly to every man, an' never done a soul a bad turn to my knowledge, an' never will, God helping me," he declared with a pious and a rapid flow of words.

"Ah! I thought only thing ever you could do was to play kiss-in-the-ring with the maidens 'pon holidays. A Radical! I give 'em joy of you—as won't be no more use to anybody than a cabbage stump. An' now you'm the last left, Sorrow Scobhull. Do you want to say anything, or will what t'others have said stand for you too?"

Scobhull reflected a moment. Then he replied, without a shadow of nervousness or emotion.

"If I weren't 'feared you'd forbid me the inn, an' refuse to serve me, I'd say a good deal. An' first I'd say you be too saucy by a long sight, talking to a parcel of growed-up men—some grey—as if they was dirt. Who've hurt 'e, that you'm so cursed vinegary? We ban't pickpockets. If a man sees a wrong done, he'm in his right to up an' speak; an' this chap can't live 'pon what he earns, therefore, as a Christian woman, 'tis your place to give him a bit more. If you'm so tight-fingered that you can't give a man with eleven in family seventeen an' six a week—all I know is the extra half-crown won't fatten you. An' a deputation did ought to be treated as such, if 'twas only a deputation of rats. So that's my say."

"You'm a butivul covey of old women—the lot of 'e," said Mrs Bradridge coldly. Yet she smiled at her pending triumph, for she had logic on her side, and the iron laws of supply and demand know no sentiment.

"Now perhaps us'll larn what you have to say, Mark Trout."

"I says 'Hear, hear'!" retorted the ostler, promptly, jumping to his feet and touching his forehead. "I says it respectful as can be, but I says it with all my strength. They'm all of a mind about it, an' so's my wife; an' they know 'twasn't any thought of mine, was it, neighbours? It comed to 'em natural, being Merryweather Chugg his thought. An' you'll never regret it, ma'm. 'Twill be money put out to a brave purpose, an' be sure to carry a blessing with it."

The woman's little eyes turned to Mr Chugg, and fixed themselves upon the water-bailiff's red and wrinkled visage.

"Oh, 'twas your thought, then? An' t'others backed you up? I be sorry for your masters, the whole five of 'em, for 'tis sartain a chap can't mind other folk's business an' his own as well. There you stand—you five—an' ax me to put half-a-crown on this man's wages. Why for? Do 'e ax because he does more'n

fifteen shillings' worth o' work a week? No, 'cause you know precious well he don't. You ax because he's got a long family. An' whose fault be that? There you stand, and there stands a rally of men over against you. There's Tom Biddlecombe an' Walter Wade, an' Jan Barker. Stand up, you men, an' say what you be getting at the different places where you works to."

The young fellows addressed obeyed somewhat sheepishly. Fifteen shillings was the weekly wage that each commanded, and Mrs Bradridge turned from them to the deputation.

"There! Here be three strong youths, an' not one but would change places with Mark Trout to-morrow, an' not one but would do his work so well or better than him. Not to mention the tips he gets from the horsemen an' others. You'm pleased to forget his come-by-chances, as soon runs into money in the hunting season."

"Ban't my aspect of the case, ma'm," said Mr Chugg, feebly.

"I'rap not. But 'tis mine, having rather more brains to my head than a beetle. Do half-crowns grow 'pon gooseberry bushes? If so, I'm blind. Why for don't you ax me to give my two hosses beans wi' their hay, an' my maid sherry wine wi' her dinner? I ban't a charity club. I'm a hard-working woman, wi' all her time took up in keeping a roof over her grey hair. Yet I haven't heard of no deputation to find half-crowns for me or to ax Duchy to loosen its greedy pinch a bit. So you'm answered."

"In fact, you can't meet the deputation," said Mr Vosper.

"No—nor any other pack of one-sided sillies. Best larn a bit from the A'mighty yourselves, I reckon. You say He looks all around a question—why don't you? An' if you want the man to have more'n he'm worth—find it yourselves."

Mrs Bradridge appeared more annoyed than was the case. Her thin bosom heaved with such loud talking, but the triumph of the argument and the consciousness

that everybody present, save only Mr Trout and the deputation, were entirely with her, put Betty into excellent spirits, though she concealed the fact.

"Well then," said Mr Chugg, "then the deputation can be broken up, an' we'm just common men again. I'm sorry for you, Trout, but there 'tis; common sense be often too strong for the heart. In fact, you'm faced with your money value, an' that's a painful circumstance for nine men out of every ten."

Mark Trout was wounded to the quick. He pictured himself returning to his poor wife with this evil news. It would be a terrible blow, for his sanguine soul, backed by the deputation, had regarded the extra half-crown as a fact established. Before this calamity the man lost his temper and became abusive.

"Who be you or any other female to say what I'm worth to a penny?" he burst out. "You'm no better than a slave-driver, an' for two pins I would throw you over this instant moment, I would!"

"You can have a packet of pins an' go, an' good riddance," said Mrs Bradridge; while Nicholas murmured into the afflicted ostler's ear, advised patience, and reminded him that it was not easy to find employment.

"Us'll see—us'll see who be worth fifteen shilling a week, an' who ban't worth a curse, come the Day of Doom," said Mr Trout bitterly; "an' I wish to God all you men had minded your own business an' not knocked your heads together to make me a laughing-stock afore the world."

Then he departed, snorting in his nostrils as he went.

"There!" said Betty. "There's a fat tom-fool for you! Do that man earn what I give him, let alone more? You know, Merryweather Chugg — nobody better."

"'Tis the point of view, my dear," answered Mr Chugg placidly.

Peace thus restored, the business of talking and drinking proceeded. Mr Vosper had already gone

home and with him Edgecombe also withdrew, for he had promised to give Hannah "good-night." Now Nicholas looked up at a little dormer in the roof of the inn, and after waiting in shadow until all was quiet, came forward and stood beneath it. Then he whistled and Hannah appeared.

"Ah! There you be, an' never no purtier face peeped through a chicket-window."

She kissed her hand to him. Nothing would have been easier than to descend and speak with him, but there was an element of romance in the position, and she liked looking down upon him from her perch.

"Has mother given in?"

"No; you was right. She over-spoke us. Never did five grown men cut such a poor figure. Even Mr Vosper hadn't a word. An' she couldn't keep her hate of me off her tongue—worse luck."

"Her'll come round. You see, her had her own hopes, an' she can't forgive so easy as some people."

"Timothy Oldreive?"

"Yes, I might have had him. He came afore you did. But he wasn't my sort—too comical-tempered for a peace-loving woman."

Hannah's former attitude of impatience at the very name of Oldreive had departed. Now she viewed him with interest, and wondered if he would do anything exciting. Sometimes, in the recesses of her heart, she trusted that he might.

"I'll never know to my dying day how I comed to be the lucky man," said Nicholas.

She leant from the little window—a dark silhouette against the candle-light behind her.

"Such a dashing chap as him, too!" continued the warrener.

"Now you know how much I love you, Nick."

"'Tis a great thought, Hannah. The man promised to be my friend before this happened. But now——"

"You can't expect him to be that—now you have taken me from him—at least he'll think so."

"Us must see how we stand certainly," admitted Edgecombe.

"I hope there'll be no trouble," said Hannah, with her lips. "He'm clever an' forceful an' proud of never knowing when he's beat."

Nicholas looked upwards with a bewilderment that the woman could not see.

"Doan't know exactly what you mean, my dear. You an' me be of a mind, so the matter's settled for ever. You'm safe. The man might have it in his heart to do a violence against me. But I be pretty well able to take care of myself."

Hannah was a little disappointed that he considered her safety so absolute.

"There's my mother an' him—a clever woman an' a clever man to plot against me."

He laughed.

"You doan't guess your own strength, my pretty girl. What's their cleverness against your love, I'd like to know? Nobody can hurt you an' me so long as we'm true lovers."

"Don't think I be feared," she said eagerly. "I'd trust 'e to stand between me an' any man as loved me, or hated me."

"Love be so lawless as hate be now," he assured her. "No man have any right to dare to love you no more but me. An' them as do will find their account in me."

"I like to hear your voice so stern! There's mother calling. I must go."

She kissed her hand to him and disappeared, while he, with new thoughts awake in his mind, lighted a lantern and set off over the nocturnal moor towards his home.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OLD JUDGMENT SEAT

ALTHOUGH Oldreive for the present shunned Hannah Bradridge very carefully, his wisdom did not extend to evasion of her sweetheart. Him the farmer longed to meet, but Oldreive quite failed to deceive his enemy when chance threw them together. Timothy first adopted a sneering and indifferent mien, which attitude forsook him before the other's directness. Edgecombe came hot to the meeting from his last recorded conversation with Hannah; and, aware that Timothy was dangerous, he quickly investigated the truth for himself and swept away his rival's assumed unconcern.

They met upon the moor at Crockern Tor, nigh Two Bridges, and the master of Cherrybrook Farm saluted Nicholas with apparent friendship.

"Ah, Edgecombe! Glad to meet again. So the attempt to get that wretched Trout a few more pence weekly failed last night?"

"It did, I'm sorry to say."

"But you're all right again, and have been using your mended leg to some purpose, I hear. Hannah Bradridge is a handsome woman, and your cottage is just the place to keep her in. The lonelier she is the happier you're likely to be, I expect."

Timothy laughed as he spoke, and Edgecombe answered, but without amusement,

"That's an uncivil thing to my ear. And there's gall in your voice, though you pretend to be joking."

"We'll leave that then, warrener. It really doesn't interest me much. This is Crockern Tor. Do you know the history of it? The old miners' parliament

used to sit here. When the Devon tinnerns parted from the Cornish, they came here. This place, where I stand at the top of these rough steps, was the judgment seat six hundred years ago. It may have been an ancient moot-hill long before that. But a man in love won't find these dry facts attractive, perhaps."

"'Tis very interesting to me, I assure 'e."

"And the punishments were short and sharp in those days. If a man adulterated his tin, the stuff was melted and poured molten down his throat. That's how treachery was served then. It's different now."

"Sit down upon that high rock," said Nicholas abruptly. "An' don't beat about the bush no more. Talk straight, for I don't go in doubt to any man if it can be helped. You comed to me when I was ill an' told me something an' axed me for my friendship. I gived it willing. Afterwards, by strange chance, us got to like the same maiden. But not before the hour we were tokened did I know that Hannah was anything to you."

Until now Oldreive had secretly believed the fact his rival uttered; but at that moment, upon the other's speech, it suited him to pretend a different opinion. He hurried into passion before his imaginary wrongs.

"Since you care to speak of this, I suppose you mean to excuse your own dirty conduct. You dare to tell me you didn't know that I was practically engaged to be married to Hannah—a thing the whole country-side knew?"

"'The whole country-side'! She didn't know it herself, anyway. Take the truth, or leave it; but don't fool yourself that I'm telling anything but the truth. I courted her and I axed her to marry me, an' she agreed so to do. Then she said as you'd been after her off an' on for a year, an' more off than on seemingly. I should judge you didn't deserve to have her upon the whole, if you could be in two minds for one moment after you'd first set eyes on her. All the same I was sorry for you, an' I am still, if it don't hurt you to hear me say so."

"You can't hurt me—except as a lifeless clod thrown

at my head and striking me can hurt. I'm quite indifferent to you both. Only I'm not blind, and you, who have chuckled and grinned your ear-wide grin to think how you had beaten me, may be interested to know that I have found you out. I'm not deceived in any particular."

"Why for should you be? 'Tis all above-board. If I had known you loved her an' found as her didn't care for you, I should have done just the same. There's been no secrets."

"That's a lie. An' how do you dare to say she didn't care for me? Ask her mother if Hannah didn't love me. She did love me. Not that it matters. All the same you might inquire where she was going on the day she changed her mind and went up to the Moor and came back engaged to you—trapped like a rabbit. And ask yourself how you got her to say 'yes.' D'you think I don't know human nature? You won her by blackguarding me—by telling her what you know against me—even to the story of the white bull. I'll warrant you licked your damned lips over that! And after you'd sworn to me never to breathe a word. So I was paid for coming to you and confessing my sins. You're surprised that I can see so deep through your red skin, you fox."

Nicholas did indeed stare with mighty astonishment.

"I be surprised sure enough," he said. "Never more so. Your part is to surprise me every time we meet. By God! your mind be foul. A man as can credit another with such hookem-snivey dealings would do the like. You don't know much about me, I reckon; but you've told me a deal about yourself, Timothy Oldreive."

"You deny it, of course. Well, I'll have to prove it. I won't threaten and bluster; that is your way; but I've got a good memory and you're worth powder and shot. Anyway I'm your enemy from this day and not your friend."

"That I'll swear to. I wouldn't neighbour with your breed—not for money untold."

"No—the fox doesn't neighbour with the hound, but he may make sport for him. You're a thought overbold, I fancy; and you don't understand women as well as I do. Hate's the lasting passion—love's nothing: it changes at a breath. A woman who has been pleased to play with one man's heart, and break it, will do the same again. That's a sport they soon get a taste for."

"She change! She ban't built to change. If she'd loved you once, she would now an' for always. She change! Do the sun forget to bring morning? Sit there in the judgment seat of the old men, an' look in your conscience an' take back the lie you have given me. An' never speak no more to me, for I won't heed 'e if you do."

Edgecombe turned and tramped off; while the other seemed to obey him, for he did not reply but sat down moodily with his eyes fixed upon a grove of trees and a ruined habitation at the foot of Crockern. Timothy was glad at this meeting; but he regretted that passion had made him declare his purpose too openly.

In the mind of Nicholas, however, remained memory of no direct threat. He departed impressed with the farmer's hatred and poignant disappointment; and so he described Oldreive's attitude when, a day or two later, he met Hannah and spent some hours beside her in a sequestered nook of Wistman's Wood. Here the ancient trees crowded together and beneath them was a little pent-house built by nature from the granite. It lay snugly hidden and faced towards the south.

Since his increasing knowledge of Hannah, Nicholas began a little to understand feminine life and the tyranny of the passing hour from which all woman workers suffer. This made him patient and not unduly exacting of her companionship, for he perceived the ever-present strain and stress each moment brought with it to her; he observed that woman's work is harder than man's in respect of its duration. Her labour never ends save when she sleeps, whereas he provides intervals of rest and leisure between his exercises; eight or ten hours will round his toil, but she

works from dawn until the time for rest. Edgecombe discussed this point while Hannah enjoyed the afternoon of Sunday.

"'Tis a plaguey life, a woman's—full to the brim with things as be nought taken separate, yet pile up into a mountain of work put all together," he said. "But you an' me must order our ways when we'm married, Hannah, so as to have a little time—if 'tis only for love-making. Us couldn't prosper else."

"'Twill be a new thing to me if we can. Why, I don't know myself these Sundays—sitting here like a lady with you to pick up my handkercher if it falls."

"You see, I don't want my life to change exactly. There's things I wouldn't like to part with; but I want to share them with you instead."

"So you shall then; but not they creepy thoughts you've got 'bout the Bible folks, as you say you can almost see now an' again. Think of the black nights I must lie alone when you be out to the rabbits! An' I do believe so much in ghostes as it is, that I don't want no more of 'em to keep me company, even if they'm holy ones."

"You'll find they Bible people shine their light on many a crooked corner of life. My mother used to say as the Book be to many women what tobacco be to many men—do ease their spirits an' calm their fret."

"Sure I wish I had more time to read it then."

"You will presently."

And then, enjoying much to pour into her ears the thoughts that he had hidden in his own bosom so long, Edgecombe traversed the old narrative, with his usual literal acceptation of it, and re-read the record into his own life and hers. The similes culled from hill and valley, from the grass of the field and the diurnal progress of the husbandman's toil, from the forces of nature spent in summer rain or winter flood—all he understood with the fulness of a child; and his eye brightened as he spoke of the shepherd and of the harvest field. He pointed to Longaford Tor, and

declared how a personal experience had changed one dream.

"'Twas there as I imaged the Lord tempted by Satan to throw Hissself down. For the sun touched a rock till it stood an' glistened like a man in white; an' the very same time a straggly purple cloud-shadow, like a huge spider, climbed the hill, as might be the monstrous devil going up to Him."

"What foolishness! You'm worse than Scobhull an' his nonsense. I'll have no more devils 'pon Longaford," declared Hannah, "for 'twas there we knowed we loved each other."

Nicholas nodded.

"No devils there no more, my pretty, nor anywhere else neither. Only the dear thought of you whenever my eyes light on the hill."

"Us gets to learn each other better an' better, Nick."

"So us do for certain."

"Do my faults trouble 'e?" she asked, coming close, that he might put his arm round her.

"I'll tell about them when I get so far."

He kissed her, put his great head against hers, and rubbed her little ear with his red muzzle.

"There's plenty of faults waiting to be found," she said. "I'm not all of a piece like you slow-fashioned men be—I mean in my mind. I like small things. Bible news is rather old. I want yesterday's as well: who be dead, where the last child was born, who be tokened, who've quarrelled, the price of corn, an' such-like. You don't 'pear to take account of all that. If I tell scandals, you yawn till I see every big tooth in your mouth. But, though I don't yawn, I get tired too sometimes of the prophets an' apostles, and so on. I'll own to you that I took more delight in them baby foxes you showed me last week than in all the Testament heroes put together. There's a terrible bit of news for 'e."

The warrener laughed aloud until those great hills rising over against him echoed his merriment from their stony clefts.

"'Tis butivul to hear you speak so plain, for us

can never have no differences so long as we keep our minds open to one another. Not but what——”

He broke off, reflected, and grew grave.

“Not but what I have news now an’ again. There’s a bit of news not two days old, an’ just such a quarrel as you say you like to hear tell of. No offence of mine, but——”

“You have fallen out with Timothy Oldreive!” she exclaimed. “Now you can interest me in earnest.”

“I have, sure enough. He pretended he didn’t care first, an’ made some silly talk; then the truth came out an’ he showed his teeth an’ his temper.”

Hannah, aroused to frank excitement, loosened herself from Edgecombe’s arm, turned herself towards him and looked into his face.

“He could feel then, for all his pretence that he’d be none the worse without me?”

“‘Feel’! Ess fay—feel strong enough to tear my heart out if he had the power.”

“He’m serious?”

“I’m sorry for the man and his savageness. He knows his loss all right.”

“He’ll learn to treat women more respectful now.”

Nicholas laughed and shook his head.

“He reckons he knows all about ’em as it is. He warned me against you, I promise you. He axed me where you was going when his telegram came that day; an’ he said you’d loved him once an’ that you’d turn from me come presently, same as you’d turned from him!”

Hannah gasped at this and went from red to pale and from pale to red as Nicholas, with genial smiles, set forth the indictment.

“’Tis the bitterness of a chap beat fair an’ square. He’ve took to weak weapons to drag your name in, poor twoad. I could most have thrashed un when he axed me to ax you questions—*you*—but I let un go to his conscience an’ left un in the judgment seat of Crockern—to judge hisself.”

“As to that,” said Hannah hastily, “I was going to

Princetown—I don't deny it—to get some things for granny. An' I was also going to meet him at the station, for Trout was driving up for him and his luggage. It is perfectly true, but——”

He kissed her into silence and stopped her mouth.

“Be quiet, will 'e? All this chatter to answer that silly snake's questions! As if I wanted you to! Suppose he said you'd done murder an' showed me the bones, should I believe him?”

“I'll have no cloud between us,” she answered passionately. “The man's putting thoughts into your head—hinting things—trying to make you doubt. Why didn't you kill him? If you'd loved me all you say, you would have killed him.”

“Why, do 'e think I took for serious a word the bitter soul spoke? Do 'e think I would belittle myself to put his questions to you? Doan't 'e rage so, my dear woman, an' heave up your butivul breast against him. He ban't worth a beat of your heart. An' do 'e think anything living could make a cloud betwixt you an' me? If a body told you I was looking at another woman, would you believe it? You know right well you wouldn't.”

“'Tis a coward's trick,” she said; “an', from caring nothing, I've come to hate him with all my strength.”

“Doan't do no such thing. He ban't worth a honest man or woman's hate. 'Tis the spite of being beaten. He loved you according to his way. An' his love's turned to gall now. He said you had broken his heart, an' he believed it when he said it.”

There was silence for a while, and grey mists began to roll over the hills as daylight waned.

“He said that?” asked Hannah suddenly, concerned with Edgcombe's last words.

“He said that; an' he believed it, I think; though I'd take leave to doubt if the woman was born who could break his heart for him.”

The statement, exaggerated though it might be, quieted Hannah somewhat. Oldreive's tribulation calmed her temper. There was flattery in his confes-

sion, and the announcement, made thus openly to his rival, gained in force.

"Fog be coming," said Nicholas looking up at the lonely valley, where great banks of vapour smothered the last sunset lights and stole shadowy along.

"I'll be angered against him no more," declared Hannah. "Let him go his way. I've done him no willing hurt, an' if he's heart-broken—why, but he ban't I'm sure; 'twas only his wild words."

"Yet us must pity him," argued Nicholas. "From my high good fortune, I must pity him as have lost where I won. An' you might do no less."

"You do believe in me through thick an' thin, don't you, Nicholas?"

"I do; I'd trust you with my immortal soul, if it ban't a wicked thing to say."

She nodded.

"Then I'll pity him same as you do. 'Tis proper to pity all weak things for that matter."

"Us'll get going now," he said. "Your butivul Sunday dress will be wetted proper even as 'tis 'fore you get home."

"Doan't you come—no call for you to catch it too."

"Leave you in this, an' find you drowned in Dart, or stogged in a bog to-morrow morning!"

They proceeded together through the great curtains of the mist. It rolled down dense and close. The long walls of the Moor, the peat cuttings, the hills and the river slowly disappeared. The undulations of the waste were all folded and wrapped in one impenetrable robe that swept upon them coolly, stealthily. Two ragged crows croaked upon the bough of a Wistman's oak and saw them not, though they passed within a few yards of the tree. The river's song was muffled, for no wind blew to pierce the gloom. All nature seemed soaked and steeped in dense, grey moisture; and the feet of the lovers brushed a way upon the dim silver dew that covered the sheep-track where they walked. Darkness fell swiftly and all marks

and signs were engulfed until the Moor vanished for Nicholas and Hannah and only the narrow circumference of two yards about them remained visible.

"Glad you seed me home after all, sweetheart. I be in a maze—the fog's got into my head I do believe," said she.

"Never!" he answered. "You'm too clear-sighted to be dazed by a cloud."

CHAPTER XVIII

LOVERS FALL OUT

NICHOLAS EDGECOMBE had saved thirty-five pounds, and this sum was now to be drawn from the Savings Bank for the purposes of Hannah's home. Serious were the debates as to how the money might best be spent, and finally Hannah determined that twenty must be expended upon the cabin and the new shed to take Edgecombe's tools, while the remainder should be reserved to meet such needs as might arise. Hannah herself had ten pounds, and with this she purposed buying china and other necessities. For the rest their deliberations ended vaguely as Nicholas desired, because it was his wish to furnish great astonishments for Hannah. He had planned mighty things upon the hillside. He had dreamed of garden flowers there, with a wire fence to keep the rabbits from them. He also designed a little fowl-run, where a dozen fine birds should meet his love's delighted vision on the marriage day. But these and other surprises he kept hidden in his mind for the present. The time was not yet when he could forbid Hannah to visit his cabin any more until she came to stop there; so he matured his plans and chuckled in secret to think of her joy when, as a bride, she should first see her perfected home.

For the present in his leisure hours he worked at the new shed, which he was able to erect very cheaply with timber from Mr Snow's farm at Cross Ways. Piece by piece he carried the wood to his habitation; and Hannah, when it was possible, sat hard by, watched the work prosper, and smelt the fragrant dust as it dropped in puffs from Edgecombe's saw.

"You might almost have been a carpenter, so clever you are," she said one day.

"An' dearly I'd have liked the job," he answered ; "but it seemed natural I should follow faither, as was a gamekeeper. Yet carpentering be the most holy trade as a boy could well be put to, for Christ was one. 'Twas at a common bench He got His thoughts while He cut an' drove an' measured and set His saw through sweet, good-natured wood, just as I be doing now. It seem the very shavings must have curled into the words of His Faither, for He was sucking in the message all them young years of His life, same as the earth sucks up the rain from heaven."

The man always turned back to this subject, for every road of his mind led thither. Hannah grew a little drowsy ; then the spirit of mischief awoke in her. Life had been running on very level lines of late. Nothing ever happened. Weeks passed, yet Nicholas did not speak with Timothy Oldreive again. Once, indeed, Hannah herself met the farmer as he rode from Princetown, and looked into his face. He had not drawn rein, but had bowed civilly and taken off his hat. His manners reminded her of the difference between him and other men, for none but Timothy ever saluted her thus. She nodded back and stood still to speak a moment. But he was gone before she uttered a word that might have stopped him, and she went on her way with her pride a little troubled by his courtesy and his apparent determination to speak to her no more. The matter stuck in her mind, though she did not mention it to Nicholas. Of late their relations were less marked by outbursts of love, but in him the passion burnt more steadily as it burnt deeper. Once only they had quarrelled, when he took the woman to task because in a flippant mood she laughed at things he counted serious. Then she gave way and expressed instant regret. Now from sheer love of excitement she trod the dangerous ground again.

"There's such a deal to puzzle a simple mind in it all. No doubt 'tis clear to you, but for my part I can't

rhyme a good few things the Lord done with right an' reason."

"Ban't all plain, I know," he admitted.

"The Man gets so cranky as any other man when He's crossed," ventured Hannah. "He'll up an' kill a silly tree at a word 'cause there wasn't no fruit there just when He wanted it; and the very name of Pharisee makes Him rage an' lose His temper right away."

"Which shows that us ought to lose our tempers too now an' again. He couldn't abide lies an' pretence an' empty talk. All the same, it don't follow a thing isn't all of one piece because we can't note the joins. Look at they gents us sees about. Their only way of killing time is by killing birds an' beasts an' fishes—at least the sort that I meet with in my walk of life. Yet some are different, and their ways be hidden from us altogether. I seed a chap last summer tramping to Fur Tor—what for? For a li'l, rubbishy plant, as only grows there in all Devonshire. An' he was so cheerful as a chaffinch when he came down along in the evening. 'Hast found it, sir?' I said to un; an' he said, 'Yes—'tis there, growing butivul.' 'Did 'e fetch a bit of it away?' I axed; an' he said, 'No, 'tis very well where 'tis.' That was his day's work! An' yet, if us could see from his point of view, we might find rhyme an' reason in it, though it don't appear at a glance."

"Who was it?" asked Hannah, more concerned with the man than the instance.

"Doan't know—a stranger; but it shows that though you can't fathom a thing, it may none the less have got a bottom."

This reproof vexed Hannah Bradridge. She pursed her lips, lolled back where she sat, and looked out of her sleepy eyes with a frown. But she said no word, and Edgecombe, busy at his work, was ignorant of her gathering anger. With an effort she mastered herself and discussed their affairs for a while. They wandered in the future, full of hopeful surmise and sanguine plan. Then, as ill luck would have it, she generalised upon the matter of homes and the blessing of them.

"Even the birds sing the happier when they've built their nests," she mused; and Edgecombe answered:

"Yet the Lord gived up His; an' He names the fact, for 'twas a grief to Him to do it. 'Twas most the hardest thing He axed His neighbours—to give up their homes."

"Well, us'll let that bide; I don't want no more Bible to-day."

"Another terrible curious thing," he continued without heeding her remonstrance, "'tis a problem to me that even the devils liked their own homes, for you may call to mind how that man of the Gadarenes had one—him as chopped hisself with stones. An' the devil in him begged Christ A'mighty most serious to let him bide comfortable, where he knowed the ways of the place, an' not send him packing out of the country."

"A mort of good beasts slain for the job," answered Hannah, "for I read the story but yesterday, an' I can well understand the folk axing the Lord to go away. Thousands of pigs drowned just to please a devil."

"'Tis a puzzling deed," Edgecombe admitted, "an' one lunatic less would be cold comfort to him as owned they swine—unless the man was a relation."

"Which shows that Jesus Christ made mistakes like anybody else—if the story's true," said Hannah defiantly.

"It is true; an' you've no right to pit your feeble mind against the Gospellers; an' I won't have you do it."

"Your mind be so strong, of course," she sneered. "You'd believe the moon was made of curds if 'twas so set down in your blessed Bible."

"Have done, or I'll give 'e a good shaking!" said Nicholas, getting very red and throwing down his tools.

"All you could do—bully a woman as ban't afeard to speak what she thinks. I'll go—me an' my poor, narrow mind. We'm no company for the like of you. You ought to have been a street preacher 'stead of a rabbit-catcher. No call to grow so rosy. Won't hurt 'e to hear the truth for once. I'm sick to death of the Bible an' I doan't care if I never hear a word of it again."

What's the good of it? What have it ever done for you, or for me either? Or for any soul 'pon Darty-moor? Fairy stories—that's what it is, an' I'd just so soon b'lieve in pixies."

"An' yet you prove the book yourself, you wicked woman!" he thundered out, "for you've got a devil in you this moment."

"You'm a great fool," she answered bluntly. "A great, soft fool, an' no husband for a sensible girl. I want to marry a man as will better hisself, an' make the world bend to him a bit, an' win a comfortable lew corner against his old age an' mine. But you—if I've got a devil 'tis called common-sense anyway——"

"Go!" he said. "Go out of my sight, else I'll go out of yours. I can't hear no more of this."

"I'll go willingly—me an' my devil—an' leave you with your prophets an' dreams—as be fitter company for you than a loving woman. If you want a helpmate, better pray to the Lord to turn a stone into one for 'e, or one of they crooked trees. Flesh an' blood won't stand you no more—leastways not mine."

She rose upon this utterance and left him; and he made no attempt to follow but stood motionless and watched her depart. His jaw fell and the greatest grief that he had known until now settled in deep red wrinkles upon his forehead. He remained without moving until Hannah had dwindled to a spot upon the heath, then he sighed and rubbed the perspiration from his face.

"To think 'twas possible anybody could quarrel 'pon that subject!" he mused in his ignorance. Next he rolled the sleeves of his flannel shirt down over his great fore-arms, dragged on his coat and sat upon a log of wood amidst the scantling of his workshop. A saw at his feet caught the sunshine, and he pressed the handle with his foot and idly watched the reflected light glitter and dance on shavings and timber.

He had heard of lovers' quarrels, and often told Hannah that such things must argue a weak spot in the

heart of the man or woman. She had declared how no such catastrophe should ever rise like a cloud upon the pure horizon of their intercourse ; and each most steadfastly supposed that the sea might sooner swallow up the land than discord break the harmony of such great love. Yet now, in a moment, born of nothing, there had fallen this bolt—a thing beyond possibility as it seemed. Here were man and maid plunged into deadly quarrel over matters that must be vital.

Unversed in such experiences, unfamiliar with the fact that words strong enough to separate men and women for life are laughed and kissed away between lovers, as easily as the sunshine dries the dew, Nicholas remained crushed and staggered with a painful sensation at the roots of his being and a dark conviction that all things were now changed for him and the lamp of his hope extinguished. Long he sat merged in gloom beyond power of mind to dispel ; and then, while buried in reflection, there came the sound of footsteps to his ear, and he saw Merryweather Chugg returning from a visit to the upper reaches of West Dart.

The water bailiff approached and bade Edgecombe "Good-day." Then he noticed that the younger man's countenance was troubled, and he turned to the growing shed that he might praise it, and so cheer Nicholas and change the tenor of his thoughts.

"You'll soon have it done, an' a good job too."

"I ban't so sure. 'Tis a question whether this here is not all waste of wood an' time."

Nicholas was unequal to concealing his emotion.

"What's vexed 'e? You'm looking wisht sure enough."

"Us all have our troubles."

"Surely. An' for yours, I can guess who 'tis that frets you. Mrs Bradridge is still far from tender where your name's mentioned. A proud woman, an' to be frank, the Bradridges of Buckfastleigh are a thought higher in the land than you. Still, if the girl's faither was Solomon, 'tis no use worriting so

long as her will is set on being Mrs Edgecombe. 'Tis only she to consider."

"Ess—only she—that's why I'm a bit long in the jaw, I reckon. You've been so friendly that I can speak to you, Chugg. You'm wise also an' have been through it. 'Tis all over—her left me half-an-hour before you comed along. God have put out my lamp."

"Left you! Why for?"

"My fault every bit of it."

"Then you've put out your lamp yourself, not God. Best set a match to it again, an' go an' seek the woman an' ax her to forgive 'e. 'Tis a very unmanly thing to fling your silly temper on the Lord's shoulders."

"'Twas almost too much. I spoke harsh. You see, I be such a New Testament chap that the stories an' sayings tumble out of my mouth, like snow out of the north wind."

"Well, you might do worse than let on about all that."

"So I might; but a bowerly maid like she can't be expected to stand it every minute. To tell the truth in her own words, I've made her sick to death of Christ an' every apostle of the lot—that's what I've done. Her haven't the same liking for it as me, yet us all have our proper characters; an' I must have angered her no doubt many a time afore she boiled over like she did just now."

"As to that, us have our proper characters as you say, Nick, an' a man's own wife an' childer will often surprise him after years an' years. Sometimes 'tis a pleasant surprise—more often not. No wonder you find there's a bit to larn yet about a six months' sweet-heart. Dearer the love, deeper the ache when we finds things we didn't count to find, and misses things we'd hoped for and fancied was there."

"Faults be common—us must all have 'em."

"We'm made so, my son. We'm built of faulty clay, because human crockery ban't fashioned to last for ever. Us must have weak spots in us to let out the

spirit o' God. 'Tis the immortal soul in the woman an' in yourself you've got to look at. For that matter, our very souls be contrivances only half ripe so long as they bides in a human frame. It wants heaven or hell to bring out the full flavour, I reckon. So us must be patient with our neighbours, an' not expect them to be better than we know ourselves to be. Even the maid we'm courtin' be short of angel."

"She'll never forgive me, I reckon. I told her plain to get up an' go. An' go she did. We'm properly out, I can tell you."

"No more'n a quarrel of lovers," said Mr Chugg, "an' the man as pokes his nose into that would be a bigger fool than me. But nevertheless I've spoke."

"I'll go down along this instant moment."

"I wouldn't do no such thing. Nought like time to cool hot blood. Give her twenty-four hours, an' take twenty-four yourself. Then, if you'm still fluttered, take twenty-four more. After that you'll come together in a proper give an' take frame o' mind. Now I must be away."

The old man tramped off without allowing Edgecombe any time to make reply.

CHAPTER XIX

REFORMATION

C HUGG had suggested four-and-twenty hours as a reasonable time for Nicholas to deny himself any sight of Hannah ; but it happened that the period was much extended by circumstances. A young man, nephew to Mr Snow, visited Cross Ways Farm at this season, and Edgecombe's care it was to find him good sport upon the Dart and its numerous tributaries. The youth departed after a week of excellent fishing, and then other business for his master had to be undertaken by Nicholas at Moretonhampstead and elsewhere.

At last, however, he was free, and hastening to Two Bridges towards evening of a day in early April, he sought Hannah. But Edgecombe met Mark Trout in the stable-yard and learnt that his sweetheart was absent.

"I drove her to Ashburton on the old woman's affairs early this mornin'. Us was off soon after daylight. Her be going to walk home perhaps, or else she'll bide the night there."

"Is Mrs Bradridge home?" asked Nicholas.

"Yes—in the bar ; but you won't help yourself much by seeing her. Ever since she denied me my lawful half-crown rise, she've been sour as beer after thunder ; an', what's worse for me, now I'm under notice altogether, owing to a very unfortunate accident. An' I can't get a job for love or money."

"Under notice ! Since when ?"

Mr Trout looked round to see that none could overhear.

"I'll tell you ; if you'll take your oath not to repeat it. Nobody knows but her an' me ; an' there's no call

they should. Well, you know Mrs Bradridge's maid, by name Jane Wood? A very pretty wench, an' a good, hard-working girl too. I was coming down the dark passage-way where the barrels be kept, an' seed her bending wi' her back turned an' nobody nigh; so what did I do, in my fatherly way, but come behind her an' give her a squeeze an' a kiss 'pon the cheek? By gor! 'Twas like eating a apple in the dark an' knowing you've struck a maggot by the bitter! For it weren't Jane Wood at all, but Mother Bradridge setting a mouse-trap! Her screeched, as though 'twas the devil hisself comed for her, an' I flipped off so fast as a round-built man like me could. But her had seed me an' no amount of humble speaking would soften it. Like a damn fool I finished up by saying I thought 'twas somebody else; an' that settled the job; for if she had thought I'd meant it, an' been carried away like, despite a wife an' eleven childer, she might have forgiven me."

This story cheered Edgecombe. He laughed for ten minutes without ceasing, until Mr Trout grew morose before such lack of sympathy.

Successive explosions shook the warrener as he started to go home; then serious thoughts intervened for a time, until the amorous Trout's reverse once more presented itself; whereupon he chuckled again and slapped his leg with great delight. But suddenly, remembering Hannah, Edgecombe stopped before reaching the Moor and then set out upon the Ashburton road. He hoped that he might see her, although it was doubtful whether she would return that day.

And meantime the woman walked homeward and met with a great adventure. Her mother's business in the little town under Buckland Beacon was quickly completed and no necessity arose to delay Hannah an hour. She went to a pastrycook's, where a friend served in the shop, made a meal of the things she liked, drank a glass of milk, and then started very happily upon her journey of twelve miles. She pursued the beautiful road now slowly unfolding

pageants of spring. She crossed Holne Bridge, where Dart, silent and mysterious, passed through rocky channels; she climbed the great hill beyond; sank down again to New Bridge; presently descended a tremendous declivity that led to Dartmeet; and saw beneath her the sister rivers mingle. Their shining confluence was set in leaf-buds, in the alder's catkins and the gold and silver flower-light of the willows. Half way up another hill Hannah heard a man's step behind her, and the next moment someone reached her side and slowed his progress. Then a familiar voice greeted her, as though no great matter stood between them; and she looked up and saw Timothy Oldreive returning from his sport.

"Congratulate me," he said. "This is the first day the water has been any good and I've killed a fifteen pounder. I ran even a bigger fish, but I lost him."

He shook hands, then showed her a fine salmon for that water. He exhibited nothing but a sportsman's frank interest in his success; and she, trying hard to conceal her nervousness and flutter of heart, praised his skill.

"There's nobody catches half the heavy fish you do," she declared.

"I get my share. Indeed I've been very fortunate in more ways than one lately, Hannah. May I call you Hannah, still?"

"Of course, if you please to."

"Well—unlucky in love, lucky in life, they say. As if love wasn't the only part of life that mattered to such as I am? But I've had a thousand pounds left me lately, and I believe a legacy of common-sense came with it. There's been a sort of turning-point—a cross roads in my life since—since you left me. I'm working like mad on the farm to try and kill thought and forget sorrow."

She regarded him with shyness. He was aware that she would probably return from Ashburton alone during the afternoon, and he had arranged this meeting accordingly. The time was ripe for it in his opinion.

He appeared better dressed than of old, and wore a neat, dark, Norfolk jacket with cap to match and breeches that showed his trim leg and small foot. In the past he had seldom been so particular; but now, despite a hard day's work upon the river, he was tidy, well-furnished and good to look at.

"I'm sure I feel right glad to hear of your fortune, Mr Oldreive."

Hannah hoped that he would bid her call him "Timothy," but he did not. Subtly he suggested some difference between them.

"Thank you, thank you. Money has its charms and its obligations. But it isn't everything. You have that consolation in the step that you have taken lately."

She flushed up at this sudden allusion to her affairs, but Timothy smiled as he spoke, and his words were uttered kindly and sympathetically. The sympathy, however, galled her, and she answered with defiance.

"We have plenty of money, too, for that matter."

"I'm right glad of it. But you've got to learn yet what a short way it goes. I've wasted a terrible lot of the hateful stuff in my time. But I'm sure Mr Edgecombe hasn't. He's much too——. Where are you going to live?"

"At Wistman's Wood."

He whistled in great apparent astonishment.

"You're joking!"

"Why shouldn't us? 'Tis where his work lies."

"Well, that's true, Hannah. A palace wouldn't be good enough for you—but I hoped such a jewel might have a comfortable case at anyrate. Still you are right—you're always right. Do you know that it makes my very soul ache to hear your voice again, and see you close, and think what a different world this might have been for me, if I had been less a fool?"

She grew very uncomfortable and doubted his title to discuss that subject; yet so dejected was his mien, so mournful his voice, that she could not grow angry.

"Things fall out by the will of God, an' I'm a fortunate woman," she said.

"An' from your height of fortune, can you not give one thought of pity to me? I know you can. Though I shall never have any of your heart, yet I know all the goodness in it. Think what I feel. Still that's nothing: you're a fortunate woman—you say so yourself. That's all I care about. I pray you'll always be so."

"My Nicholas be trustworthy an' true an' so good as gold."

Timothy ignored all these adjectives but the last.

"'Good'—good for what? Good for nothing I always feared; but I'm thankful to hear you say differently. I know well what manner of man you deserve for a husband. So you mustn't be angry if he does not satisfy me. A hero wouldn't. Frankly, and without jealousy, isn't he rather lacking in character—too fond of tags and texts? I know men pretty well. But I'll thankfully take your word that I'm wrong. He seemed to me to be common, only perhaps I'm prejudiced. He seemed to me to be no more good than bad—colourless—no more good or bad than a healthy vegetable. I'm so jealous for you, because I know you're highly intelligent and poetic and want more than a vegetable for a husband. Of course, I cannot look at a man who has robbed me of my very heart's blood without feeling a little bitter; but I'm calm now; I try to think only of duty; I try to forgive him. He seems to be a man without a friend or an enemy—like a tree in a hedge—nothing. Don't think I hate him. I tried to, and I couldn't—even when I thought of his awful treachery to me. But I'll keep all that hidden from you. Now I only envy him—only envy him with every throb of my pulse—because you have found something in him to love."

"I do love him with all my heart," she said, "an' no man will ever shake me from him."

"God forbid, Hannah! Fancy such a thought crossing your mind. I only want you to be perfectly happy always."

"But not him?"

"Yes, Edgecombe too—if your happiness depends

on his—as you think now. But you may be wrong there. I wish you both well ; and you'll never know what it costs me to say that, after all you have made me suffer. I was terribly punished for my carelessness—terribly. You cannot guess how I loved you—and do.”

“ Then why for did you warn him against me ? ” asked Hannah abruptly.

He looked at her and stared.

“ He told you that ? ”

“ He did.”

There was silence, then Oldreive spoke again.

“ I was not myself—somehow the vision of you came so near just then—the terrible memory of all I had lost. I loved you so that I thought I should go mad on that day. And I forgot I was a gentleman. The sight of life stretching away without you blinded me. I raged—I even raged against you. I could have cursed God. Edgecombe—well, you must try to make him more generous to me. At that moment he would have seen what I was suffering had he been made of finer stuff.”

“ He pitied you, I know, from his heart.”

“ And went off to tell you about my agony. Had the positions been reversed I should have kept silent, out of respect for a hopeless sorrow, and forgiven the man his bitter words, and known full well that they were not meant. But we cannot alter the blood in us ; we cannot rise to delicate feelings if we're born without them. No doubt a man is much happier for being less sensitive. Only you mustn't be angry at the folly I talked in my anguish. The fits come on me still ; but I try to hide them now. They gnaw me inside, and no eye guesses. You're so modest and humble and set such little store upon yourself that you cannot credit how you broke up the very ground under my feet and made life an earthquake when you turned your back upon me. I came as near destroying myself as ever a man in this world. Now I'm trying to learn the cruel lesson you've taught me, dear Hannah.”

"I'm sure you'll live to be thankful that it fell out for you as it have."

"Not that. To my dying day I shall always mourn what might have been. I wasn't worthy ; but I was worthier than the other, because I had gentle blood in my veins. You'll never understand that chance has made you a lady. You see the difference between yourself and every other woman you meet ; yet you won't understand. But you must be dead to me I suppose ; I must ask God to leave you out of my nightly dreams. As for the man, don't ask me to forgive him yet—I can't ; I don't understand people of that class, I suppose. With my own labourers there is always something hidden. I can't sink to their level, perhaps. It is my misfortune, not their fault. My own clowns, Scobhull and—but we'll leave that. Am I walking too fast for you ?"

She shook her head, bewildered by his volubility. He said so much so quickly. He presented such new lights and new attitudes. Answers leapt to her lips, but he had always passed the point and pressed on to something else before she could speak. At length, however, he lapsed into silence. But she found herself unable to break it. The man's own grief and suffering he had impressed upon her before everything, and now in sadness she considered them.

Presently, where the path led away to Cherrybrook Farm from the main road, he prepared to leave her and proceed up the river valley to his home.

"Good-bye, and God bless you, my dear, and forget anything that I have said that hurt you. I wouldn't hurt your shadow even if I could. You know that. I only hope you'll be happy always—always."

"An' you too—some day."

"As happy as a hermit can be," he said turning round. "You must remember I've got to live my life alone now."

Once she glanced back as she climbed upwards from the bridge and looked at him ; once he turned to gaze upon her. She saw that he was watching, and a great

desire to weep came upon her. She quickened her pace, and pushed on until he was out of sight ; then, after passing Mr Chugg's cottage at the top of the next hill, Hannah, very weary now, trudged slowly along the straight, undulating road to Two Bridges. Dart lay upon her left, and its voice, carried on the wind, took the place of the other voice.

Her spirit was in some turmoil at this meeting, for the man had mixed his words deftly. Now she flamed at recollection of the contemptuous way in which he had spoken of her lover ; now she sighed before Oldreive's humility under his loss and at his frankness and manly determination to face life and order his ways the better for this hard blow. He had turned a clean page of his story it seemed, and his last assurance, that none now would ever share his lot, impressed Hannah greatly and sadly. Her mind felt over-borne by his subtle skill. She walked slower and slower, and presently stood motionless in the road. Then she sat down upon the grass beside the way, and plucked a blossom of yarrow, and pulled it to pieces. Dart called from the valley and she half listened, as though the river's voices were charged with a special message for her ear alone.

It was the unexpected attitude of Timothy Oldreive that chiefly stunned her. To her amazement the man had absolutely changed, and for the better in every respect. He seemed a different being—a creature purified and rendered noble by this trial. Out of the crucible of his disappointment he had emerged all new. His pride was humbled, his ill-ordered life apparently reformed. The only aspect of the old Timothy centred in his attitude to Edgecombe. But Hannah held that to be natural, and it served to show the depth of his disappointment. She mourned the cruel things that he had uttered against Nicholas ; hardly less she mourned the misery that was responsible for them. His voice and his face rose to her ear and eye. A sudden sense of loss and a wave of desolate anguish flooded over her soul. In that

moment she looked up at the sky and spoke aloud with passion.

"All this he could do because I turned my back upon him ; but what would he not have done if I had bided patient and bided true?"

Her cry spoken, she blushed that even the birds should hear it, and taxed herself with a crime. Cast in a mould not ingenuous, yet not built to see the lie this man had acted under her eyes, Hannah now sat beside the highway torn to pieces, miserable, deceived and ashamed of her thoughts. In the lift and lull of the wind, from where the river ran over little falls between sheets of still water, its music came and went. Now the melody was distinct with the clean, sharp ripple of tumbling and foaming water ; now it faded to a whisper as the breezes died ; now it was quite lost upon her ear as the wind waxed high again and played his proper music on the ancient harps of the grass and the granite.

From Dart to Hannah's bosom swept the name of her betrothed, and, upon the thought, arose the picture of him and the memory of him when last they parted. She saw Nicholas standing red, rueful, irresolute where the white shavings flew hither and thither and the ribs of the new shed stood round about him. Suddenly, with a desire intense and burning, she yearned to see him now, to touch him, to fill her eyes with him, to feel his arm round her, and let his voice echo through each recess in her brain and drive the other out. Weary though she was, the woman rose with purpose to tramp up to Wistman's Wood before she returned home. And then Edgecombe anticipated her plan and appeared upon his way to meet her.

Seeing Hannah, Nicholas began to run, and yet while fifty yards distant, he lifted up his voice and bawled to her.

"My own darling maid—my own heart ! I be sorry—I be cruel sorry for my wickedness. I'll never, never vex 'e no more—No, no—I never will !"

There were tears in her eyes when he reached her,

and she could not speak. But she let him caress her, hug her to himself and take her upon his lap beside the way, for the gloaming had fallen and the lonely road was empty.

"To think you can forgive me—all made of goodness that you be—an' me such a one-sided, obstinate, blind brute of a man!"

"No—no—'tis I was wrong, an' wicked, an' evil-spoken, and 'tis my thoughts that were wrong, not yours. You served me proper an' I'll never think so evil again," she said with the broken sighs that follow tears. Yet in her mind was her recent adventure, not her quarrel with Nicholas. That difference had faded into nothing from her standpoint; but from his it still remained his most tragic experience.

"Forget it. If you can be so loving an' sweet an' good as to forgive—then forget too, dear Hannah. 'Tis a lifetime since I seed 'e."

"Hold me tight—tight," she cried passionately. "I wish to God you could hold me so tight that I could never get away from the sight of you no more. Either that, or else that you could squeeze the life out of me once for all."

He laughed and hugged her.

"So I will hold you tight come presently. Only a few little months now, then there'll be no getting away from me, never no more."

"An' forgive my temper, an' my thoughts—forgive my wicked thoughts, though you don't know them. Forgive everything, and let us start to love each other more than ever, an' think of nought but one another by day an' by night with all our hearts—will 'e, my own Nicholas?"

He showed great joy at this speech.

"'Tis like an angel from heaven telling butivul things to me. Your voice—the lovely moosic of it! Love 'e an' think of 'e! Yes—an' I'd be grinded to powder for 'e, my dinky dear—an' thank the Lord to do any humble service for 'e that a man might."

Hannah grew more calm as Edgecombe went home

beside her. She spoke of her long walk, hesitated upon the subject of Timothy Oldreive, and finally determined to make a clean breast of that incident on the following morning. Sufficient was her suffering for that day, and she had no heart to break the harmony of perfect moments.

"Must come upalong an' watch the shed growing," declared Nicholas. "It do seem like twenty years since I saw my own girl. An' twenty years older I've been feeling of late days; but a young man again in this last half hour—thanks to Him as was watching over the pair of us unbeknawn. Now I be going to see you home; an' then I shall go in the bar an' drink a pint of ale 'pon it, and wish the world good luck."

CHAPTER XX

THE CHERRY TREE

FROM their lofty home at Bray Farm, perched upon the shoulder of Bair Down, Mary Merle and her brother viewed the life of Two Bridges, and received with various emotions the event that now interested frequenters of the "Ring o' Bells."

Six weeks had passed, and spring was brushing the moor with verdure, flaming along the greater furzes, lighting the larch with emerald, waking the music of the birds, and breathing love beside the river. There came a day when Teddy Merle and his sister set forth to pick primroses by Dart. The boy, indeed, held such an occupation beneath him, but Mary hinted at obligations not a few; so together they went into the valleys where flowers grow; together they passed beside shining stickles and silent pools; by little beaches of sand and gravel; by the brake fern's silver, where it curled out of the grass; by the last glory of the willows and the earliest promise of the may. Dim, starry clumps of primroses tucked into cradles of moss scented the earth and brightened the river dingles with their scattered light. Up-springing broom studded with a thousand buds, told of splendour to come; tender vetch and pea, bryony and bed-straw climbed upwards again; marsh violets, kingcups, and cuckoo flowers shone where the grass was greenest above hidden springs; and, within Dart's crystal, life also awakened to the touch of the season. Subaqueous mosses increased; pink new-born streamers stretched and twined and rippled deep under the river, and delicate threads and tentacles glimmered in the refracted sunbeams there. Tiny beetles, like black

diamonds, danced lightning measures around each other upon the still pools beside the banks; and water-spiders moved together, each wonderful little life poised here between two transparencies.

Condescending to achieve great deeds at his humble task and mildly tolerant of Mary's sustained applause, Teddy soon filled a market basket with primroses. Then, seeking for rarer things, he brought his sister a bunch of marsh orchis and three white bluebells.

Presently they sat and ate their dinner, while conversation took a sudden turn that ended in tragedy. Its immediate results, however, were diverse. While an outburst of bitterness relieved the lad's young heart from pent up passion, to Mary her brother's words brought anxiety of mind and other emotions that led her into folly before the day was done.

"'Tis little more than three months to his wedding now," said Ted abruptly. There was no need for mentioning names.

"Ess, you'll not be so welcome up to the wood then, I'm afraid."

"As to that, I ban't too welcome now. The man's moonstruck an' often lets me ax him a question thrice afore he wakes up an' answers it."

"He loves her dearly—a huge power of loving in him there is—just like a fiery furnace have a huge power of burning."

Teddy laughed contemptuously, and flung a stone at a yellow wagtail that bobbed by the river's brink.

"A huge power of believing every damn silly thing anybody likes to tell him—anybody in a petticoat I mean."

"That I'm sure he doan't. Nobody's nothing to him but Hannah. He walks dreaming past me now an' again, so near as I be to you: though he's always got a smile an' a cheerful word if I call out an' wake him from his thoughts. But nobody can influence him—man or woman."

"More's the pity then."

"Take Mrs Bradridge. I'm sure he must know she

hates him, yet what do he care? Not a rush. What do he care for all Dartymoor while he've got her? She's everything he wants to know about."

The boy sneered and pursed his lips.

"He've got something to larn about her yet, however," he answered. "Least said soonest mended. Not but what he might live to thank me if he knowed all I could tell him, only I shouldn't live to hear him do so."

"Whatever do you mean, Teddy?"

"I mean that if I told him what I've seed with my own eyes only ten days ago, he'd rise up in his wrath an' smash me like an egg. Then, after it was too late an' he found I had told the naked truth, he might be sorry."

"He ban't feared of the truth. Never no truer man walked this earth."

"I know all that; but he ban't going to credit me with the truth, or anybody else, if he hears a thing that tastes bitter against Hannah Bradridge. Do 'e think Nicholas would believe a winged angel against her? Not him! But I know—young as I be—that you'm all alike, you females. You'd do the same to-morrow if you got the chance."

"You didn't ought to hate women so fierce, for you'd be a tidy fool if it wasn't for mother an' me," said Mary frankly. "But for my trouble, you couldn't read or write this minute."

"Well, I'm paying for it, ban't I?—wasting a whole day picking weeds——"

"Pay me better, Ted," she said suddenly, "be friends and trust me."

"Trust a girl!"

"You've trusted me afore with secrets, an' no harm done, I'm sure. Tell me what you know about her. I lay 'tis all some silly mare's nest. You'm so set against her that you think everything she does is wrong. 'Tis terrible to see such sour temper in a child like you."

"She've took the man away from me," he said sulkily.

"She've spoke against me to him very like; an' I don't much care what I say against her. God knows I was true to Nick always, an' always shall be; but that—I can't be so true as to tell him that. 'Twould be cutting my own throat, for he wouldn't believe it, but just send me packing, never to stand afore him again."

"Tell me then—but perhaps there's nought to tell."

"Nought! I can see with my eyes—fool or no fool."

"Yes—we know very well your eyes be sharp."

"I will tell you," he declared shortly; "then you'll know if I ban't wise to hate her. She'm not honest to him. She foxes him. Ten days ago I was coming home by Prince Hall Avenue after dark, an' I passed her an' Tim Oldreive near Chugg's house. Off the high road, mind you—in the plantation. They didn't see me, but I heard the man's voice, though not his speech."

"Might have been Jenny Chugg along with him."

"Fiddlestick-end! I know 'twas Hannah by the deep laugh of her."

"She could laugh! Still, all this you say is nothing—nothing at all," declared Mary, though her heart beat fast.

"Nothing at all you think? His sweetheart out by night with another man!"

"A mare's nest as I expected," said Mary with apparent composure; "an' you didn't ought to be so quick to think evil at your tender age. Why, I seed them together in broad day at Princetown last week."

"On Thursday, was it?"

She nodded.

"There you are! That was the very day me an' Edgecombe drove into Moreton market with two of Farmer Snow's pigs. An' she knowed he was going."

"'Tis Mrs Bradridge keeps throwing them together. 'Twad always her hope. Yet Hannah's up along with him, on an' off, three days every week. I never hardly looks up the valley of an afternoon without seeing him coming down, or her going up. Better forget what you told me. No call to turn it into trouble anyway."

"No trouble of mine—not now you know it an' take it so lightly. All the same, Nicholas Edgecombe wouldn't take it lightly. Us met Oldreive not long since, an' he was so meek as Moses, an' gived Nick 'good-day'; an' Nick gived him the same, an' told me, after he had gone, that the man was a reformed character by all accounts. But if he knowed——"

"Wonder if us ought to get it to him in a roundabout way," mused Mary.

"Roundabout to him! There's no being roundabout with him. If anybody dared to tell him, he'd hammer the story down their throats."

"A woman might."

"So she might. They'm fools enough for anything."

The boy, his duty done in his opinion, departed and left his sister to carry home their scented spoils. With a nobler occupation and the taking of hawks' eggs from a fir tree up the river, his time would now be occupied. But Mary delayed full of thought. She knew right well this matter was no business of hers; and yet she loved to fancy that it might be her business. Her worship of Nicholas was hidden carefully enough now; yet it endured and was the salt of her life, though she won sorrow from it rather than joy. These rumours concerning Hannah threw Mary Merle into deep dismay; and she believed that this dismay was honest. She had herself seen more signs than were visible to Teddy, and now she added all her knowledge together. Her mind first turned to the woman and she speculated upon the possibility of speaking to Edgecombe's sweetheart; but that road looked vain. Hannah and Mary had long ceased to be more than acquaintances. They were separated by a secret that both knew and one thought the other might reveal. The elder was perfectly aware that Mary loved Nicholas; and she had let Mary know it. Therefore they drifted apart and the old intercourse, once broken, could never be renewed. Nobody marvelled, for to the outside world Hannah's betrothal was sufficient to account for such a defection.

Dismissing any thought of approaching her former friend and turning also from a wild notion that she might address Mrs Bradridge, the girl busied herself with Nicholas Edgecombe, and almost before a rash idea of speaking to him was shadowed in her mind—while yet she had not pondered the unwisdom of such a step nor finally rejected it—the warrener himself appeared upon his way up the river and welcomed her, and stood beside her, while Dart was reflected in her eyes and a wild cherry nodded snowy tassels above her head.

Long did both man and woman recollect the theatre of that meeting. A wind-swept, barren region of the hills had better suited such speech as passed between them. But the sunshine was round about, and the songs of the river and the birds. Lapped in sheer loveliness they sat, where one gnarled trunk of ebony and silver arose and an ancient cherry tree towered aloft. Light freckled her grey boughs with gold, and the umbels of ivory blossom wove a fair pall for their dying parent. Her crown had already perished and her whole tattered fabric was partly dead; yet the magic of May had touched her heart once more, and aloft, in the beautiful lights and shadows, in the meshed sunshine, in the transparent, brown, infant leaves and in the blue shade thrown by petal upon petal, the ruin sang a swan song to spring. Within her drooping flower-cups, little, black humble-bees made a pleasant sound and gathered their bee-bread with thanksgiving.

"Why, wherever did you spring from?" cried Mary, starting to see her thought beside her.

"Going up from Dartmeet. 'Tis butivul growing weather."

"So 'tis then. Me an' Ted have been picking primrosen. Now he's off for birds' nests an' have left me to carry the basket."

"I'll do that for 'e in a minute."

"You'll think I meant to ax you, but I'm sure I didn't, Nicholas."

"I'd do more'n that for you, Mary, as you very well

know. I doan't forget all them days to Bray Farm, an' never, never shall. You an' your mother, too, be made of goodness. Seems to me that nowadays the whole world is brimming with goodness for that matter. Anyway the earth be growed to a perfect place for me."

She sat by him in a mighty flutter. That he should thus dwell upon her part and her mother's in the past, she argued in her stupidity to be a hopeful sign of his mood. Rather from his last utterance of a perfect earth she might have read a pure, heart-whole trust in Hannah. Mary's mind was not quite single, yet she meant no absolute evil. She believed that it was her regard for him that plunged her now into a flagrant error. The delicacy, the difficulty, the futility had each sufficed to shut her mouth, given a moment's reflection; but she did not reflect; she rushed headlong in and spoke upon mingled impulses. Too late she regretted the madness, but even then she could not wholly analyse her motives.

"Haven't seed Hannah by the river?" he asked, loading a clay pipe and lighting it: "I haven't caught a sight of my girl for a whole week now—think o' that! An' my own fault altogether, for I've told her not to come to the wood no more till her comes to stop. I doan't want her to see my great surprises."

"Teddy says you be doing wonderful things."

"Well—just a bit now an' again as I get time. But you walk over an' see for yourself. I shall be proud to show you."

"An' I shall love to come when you please. How I wish—I wish that Mrs Bradridge was different, don't you, Nicholas?"

"She'm my mother-in-law afore next autumn, so I can't say nothing but good of her. All the same, to be plain, I could wish, like you, as she was a trifle softer. Maybe she'll shift round to friendship, presently."

"She do hammer away so at Hannah. She'd make her darter change her mind to-morrow if she could."

Nicholas nodded rather grimly.

"If she could—yes. It ban't no news to me; though I'm sorry you know it: because that shows she don't hide her feelings."

"No—not from nobody. 'Tis Mr Oldreive, of course. And dropping water wears away a stone—much more the acid of such a woman's tongue her darter's courage."

The other flushed, then laughed.

"Read better than that," he said. "Look into other hearts if your own ban't built bigger than to think such a thing, Mary. Do 'e fancy ten thousand bitter tongues would sour the sweetness of my woman, or shake my trust in her, or blunt her love of me? You doan't know yet what love be like, my girl, for you'm still a slip of a child; but you will know some day; an' then you'll look back an' understand that 'tis a tower of strength between a man an' silly fear."

Mary smarted, for this fatherly reproof was worse than a box on the ear had been. Her mind grew overclouded by anger, and she lost self-control.

"You'm right: love's nought to me; yet 'tis funny to see them as be in it. For it do make a chap simple, seemingly—not to say soft. Love can't see in the dark like a cat anyway—even I know that. An' you needn't drag me in, an' say what I feel, or don't feel. I spoke for your good, an' there be no call for you to treat me like a child—me as be up twenty year old—wi' my share o' sorrow, too."

"Well, well, I'm sorry. But don't be spiteful. You'm worse than Teddy. Be bigger-minded; be so large-hearted as Hannah, if you can. Every man an' woman might learn of her, I'm sure."

The girl laughed coldly, and in the sound was such significance that Edgecombe grew hot again.

"Doan't!" he said. "Doan't 'e cackle like that—ban't honest laughter—there's a depth to it. Laugh at me, if you please—not at her if you want my friendship."

"I laughed when you said she was larger-hearted than me," Mary answered stubbornly.

"Then 'tis a small heart you laughed out of, an'

a jealous heart, an' a heart as sour as a sloe," he returned.

"You hate me because I'm brave enough to tell you what you ought to know about her."

"I couldn't hate anybody as have been so good to me as you, Mary Merle—not unless they done something terrible vexatious."

"Was she better to you than I was? Did she think more of your pain? Did she put a pillow tenderer? Did she pray prayers longer for 'e by night?"

"No, she didn't. You was both so gentle an' soft-handed as angels. An' now you an' her have falled out, an' sorry I am to think it."

"An' she invented a reason, I dare say?"

"Hannah's never named you. She tells me that there is no call for me to know why you quarrelled. An' I dare say there was no call for the quarrel neither, for that matter."

"An' wasn't I your friend too? Yet because I reckon there be things you did ought to know about her, you heap scorn on me an' say my heart is sour."

He stared at her, listened to the shrill sob in her voice and marvelled to see such vain temper.

"What's took 'e? Never knowed you could be so cross. An' such a day too! Must have got out wrong side of your bed, Mary."

"You laugh, an' laugh, an' play with me. But I'll play with you. I'll make you angry in a moment—then I'll laugh."

"Why, you cranky little twoad, you want a whipping!" he said, but grinned all the time and went on smoking his pipe.

Passion shook her now and she did not choose her words.

"Not I—not I wants a heavy hand, but your deceitful, sleepy-cyed woman, with her airs an' graces—so honest an' large-hearted—too large-hearted for your peace, as you'll find come presently! You stare, but even a child that wants smacking can see further than a blind man same as you be!"

He sat up and regarded her with frank solicitude.

"The sun's touched you, I'm fearing. Best come home," he said.

"Sun an' moon an' stars—all alike to her—an' dark nights best of all. Ax her where she was ten evenings ago, an' she'll tell you in Prince Hall plantation with Timothy Oldreive—if she's not a liar. Ax her who took her to Princetown last week when you drove pigs to Moreton. There! I was going to tell you, 'cause I loved you true—loved you with every drop of blood in my body; an' now I tell you because I hate you worse than I hate hell. An' I'm glad I've told you; an' I wish 'twould kill you to hear me."

In a dull, stolid fashion Nicholas tried to associate this raving woman with the laughing, industrious happy daughter of Mrs Merle at Bray Farm. But wonder turned to indignation at her malice. In thought he pursued her utterances carefully to the moment when she had spoken evil of Hannah. Then he rose to his feet, towered above her and rolled out his anger.

"How do you dare to take her name on your crooked tongue, you little rat-tail? To think such a bit of a woman as you can be so poisonous! An' your brother—I see where he's learned his lesson now. Though he's only dared to scowl, while you dare to talk like this to my face! Song-bird an' snake ban't so different as you an' her! Small blame she dropped such a wicked woman, but was too generous to tell me why. To read evil into her life, because she walked after dark with another man! Do 'e think I shouldn't be the first to know if there was ought to know? Do 'e dream that she have got a wish, or thought, or hope, or prayer from me—except the prayer she wearies Heaven with for my betterment? Do 'e think that a whole sky of prying, peeping eyes would find her out in one wrong deed? Do 'e think all the lies the devil ever hatched would quicken my heart by a beat about her? She'm above the pack of you, as the sun be above the earth. She can walk by night in any den of wickedness an' be as pure as a moonbeam. God forgive you, Mary

Merle. You've made me very sorry for you, not for myself."

He shook his head ; his speech slowed ; he talked himself from rage into pity. And when he turned his back and departed, the girl flung herself upon her face, writhed like an injured insect, and sobbed her heart out. Petals fell upon her from the cheery tree, as though they would cool her swollen cheeks with their purity ; Dart cried and bade her come, bathe and be clean. A frantic desire filled her heart : to leap into the water, while yet Nicholas remained at hand. Thus she would at least have his arm round her once in her life. But he was gone before she could translate thought into action.

CHAPTER XXI

WEDDING GIFTS

IT was with reluctance that Hannah gave up her visits to Wistman's Wood at Edgecombe's desire. His simple mind had long been set upon surprises for her, and he thought to increase her joy when she should find how he had waved a magic wand over their future home, and glorified it with additions undreamed of.

He had bought things that seemed beautiful to him, for the natural eye is without judgment amid the achievements of art or craft. Perception in this sort he had none, but to the best of his wit he went to work, tried to see with Hannah's eyes, and remembered very perfectly any expression of admiration that had passed her lips concerning things to be purchased in shops.

Mr Snow's nephew, as a practical return for good sport shown, sent Nicholas some mighty rolls of old illustrated journals. These contained many large engravings and various coloured prints of the sort familiar at Christmas time. With this art the warrener covered the walls of his kitchen, and liberally plastered his bed-chamber also. Thus the little rooms displayed representations of nearly all those great events that had happened for three years. The appliances of his calling he removed to the new shed, which was now tarred and roofed with grey iron. He had doubly boarded the north and western faces of his home; for albeit no draught ever reached his tough frame, Hannah had declared the walls quite pervious to those bitter winds that swept down Dart from the gullies above Wistman's Wood. He had also set up a chimney-cowl, that the smoke from the stove might be carried away

and not return in fitful volumes. He spread thick cocoa-fibre matting over the floor and nailed a brilliant piece of linoleum in front of the fireplace; while upon the chimney-piece he arranged six vases: one pair of blue china, with prisms of glass that gently jangled when the wind blew; one pair of red earthenware, with glass flowers stuck upon them; and one pair of green china, having chocolate-coloured birds painted thereon. In the midst stood an alarum clock. Edgecombe held that a vase must contain some form of vegetation to justify its presence. Neglecting the lovely forms of life his heel crushed daily, the warrener, when next at Princetown, purchased sundry packets of dried sedges that were dyed scarlet and orange and a metallic green. With this dreadful death he crammed the vases, and grinned to think of Hannah's admiration when the spectacle should burst upon her. Next he fought with the waste at his door. In leisure time he laboured here; brought river sand, trenched and dug deep. Then, with the advent of May, he sowed bright annual flowers—nasturtiums, marigolds and poppies. He hoped their petals would flash a lovely welcome to Hannah when the great day in August came. Another achievement he also counted on to bring her delight. He copied the enterprise of one who had worked before him in this place and built a little pen for fowls. This was made of wire netting, and had a roost at one end fashioned strongly enough to defy foxes.

Hannah meantime found plenty to occupy her attention. But her preparations were spasmodic and less strenuous than her lover's. She was presently going to Exeter to buy the linen and china. Her own apparel now occupied her needle and filled her time. Her mother, it was said, had fallen into brutality towards the girl, and alternately swore and scolded. Yet, as the time drew nearer, Betty's manner was found to change. She ceased a little from her constant complaining, treated Hannah with an increase of kindness in public, and showed aversion from discussing the marriage with anybody.

When little more than a month remained before the wedding-day, those interested began to consider the propriety of gifts, and Sorrow Scobhull was the first to appear before Nicholas with a memento. Sans ceremony, he dragged a little volume of Culpepper's "Herbal" from his pocket and presented it to the warrener.

"'Twas my mother's," he said; "an' a very useful book, if you've got sense to understand. 'Tis 'bout the plants of the earth an' the reason why they was made. Each have got its uses—its balms an' its poisons—according to the planets in heaven. An' 'tis very well set down, with the way to make the physic. An' as a married man, with childer for sartain inside a year, your wife will most likely find it come useful."

Nicholas expressed great gratitude, and showed doubt as to whether he might take the volume.

"But what'll you do without it?" he asked.

"Ban't no use to me. I shan't marry now, because I be the sort as had just courage to ax once, but not enough to try twice. Besides, when my ill does come—'twon't be the sort as herbs of the field can minister to. No use for doctors' stuff when you'm full to the neck with river water. So keep the book an' I'm sure I hope it will come handy."

Other gifts reached Edgecombe from various friends. He felt bewildered to find that so many neighbours thought kindly of him and were glad at his happiness. Mr and Mrs Chugg sent a Britannia metal teapot; the warrener's master and mistress gave him a new suit of clothes; a knife came from Teddy and another from Axworthy. Mark Trout, who had found work at Bray Farm, thanks to Mr Vosper, explained his inability to offer anything, but wished Edgecombe all good fortune and only a few in family; while Mrs Merle's head man himself desired Nicholas to accept of some young ducks and guinea-fowls, together with ten shillings in money. Another gift also came from Bray Farm, and the hand of the giver brought it.

What Mary Merle had endured from this man's

rebuke none but herself would ever know. Her torment kept her sleepless through two nights, and only dulled after many days of shame and mental suffering. Secret, fiery tears were the physical reminder of that terrible meeting; sudden blushes burned through her skin down to her heart and, fading, left her faint. His quick contempt made her shudder still when the words came back to memory; yet, from a desire to fly far away and never again be seen by him, or breathe the air he breathed, another wish, quite opposite to this, presently arose and mastered her. Now she yearned to crawl to his feet and cringe there and beg forgiveness. She knew that she was powerless to hate him, and love, smothered a moment under the volcanic flood of his condemnation, lived again within an hour.

Conscience sided with inclination and she assured herself that she owed it to her soul to confess sorrow and ask forgiveness. For what had she done? She had spoken with conscious malice; she had tried with all her power to wound Edgecombe because he loved another woman better than he loved her. To herself she stripped her motives naked and went even beyond the truth in severity of self-condemnation. She had tried to poison another's brimming cup of happiness—a deed that had been dark even for a fiend. She was terrified to discover her own capabilities towards evil. From that day the music of river-shallows sent a pang to her spirit, and the wild cherry trees in spring-time hurt her with their glory, like the rough handling of a bruise. Yet now she decided with herself to see Nicholas and ask his pardon. And this she undertook not for her own relief alone, as Oldreive had once done, but because she believed such penance to be a part of duty. Storm and stress of mind went to her decision; first she liked the thought, then she loathed it; but finally decide she did; and went to Edgecombe at his home. In her hand she carried a little gift to lessen the difficulty.

Nicholas saw her coming over the moor to him,

hesitated, set down a paint-brush, with which he was giving his cabin a final coat of brick-red, and then walked to meet her. At that moment it was that her mission seemed most difficult, and Mary felt the world shake under her feet; but she kept on, and as soon as he reached her she held out her hand and spoke.

"No call to shake my hand if you can't do it. You've a right not to. I've been a very, very wicked woman. An' I've come to say so, an' ax you to forgive me for all my crooked speeches against her. Please, please forgive me, Nicholas, if you can find it in your heart to."

He took her hand and shook it and held it.

"Why," he answered, "that goes without saying. Forgive you, of course, as I hope you'll forgive me. My anger went beyond the truth. Anger mostly does."

"It did not. You were gentle compared to what I deserved. Though it pretty near killed me to be handled so—by a man. I nearly throwed myself in the river after you'd gone."

"For why?"

"For wickedness. But leave it. You forgive me an' ax no questions; an' I tell you, wi'out axing, that 'twas all spite an' temper an' the devil in me. I didn't mean a word of it. Only what I said was true, not a single atom of what I hinted at behind."

"I know it very well."

"An' so did I, an' that's my great sin, an' I thank you that you can forgive it, an' if you could forget it too, I'd thank God. But that you never will. Hannah be the best, sweetest, loveliest woman, an' she; but there, you don't want me or anybody to tell you about she. You know her better'n she knows herself, I hope."

"I do," he said. "You've the sense to see the very truth. I know every fibre in her, an' the meaning of every look an' word an' sigh an' laugh. Never one body knowed another like I know her. An' she knows me, an' knows 'tis a great ugly parcel she'm taking, with only a very common fashion of goods inside it. Nothing's hid; we trust each other, like you trust gold money."

Why be you an' she out still? Can't 'e make it up now?"

"'Tis no fault either side, but a thing us can't tell the reason for very well," said Mary frankly.

"I hope it will come right, then, for 'tis a little thing if it ban't big enough for words."

Mary was thankful he did not guess that it might be too big for words.

"Anyway," he said, "she'll never know about our foolishness by the river."

Mary nodded her gratitude; then she suddenly produced a present, and offered it to him.

"'Tis from my mother an' me—a little old sampler that great-grandmother worked a hundred years ago. Hannah has often said she thought it beautiful."

The girl took her ancient needlework from a piece of paper, and showed a sampler wrought with figures of flowers, birds and stags. Verses of some venerable hymn formed a centre-piece, and at the bottom particulars appeared concerning the little crafts-woman. Thus they ran:—

*"Priscilla Merle, that is my name,
And with my needle I tell the same,
And by my work you plainley see
What care my parents took of me.*

*"Born 23 January in the Year of Our Lord 1785. And finished
my sampler this March the first 1798."*

Edgecombe praised the work very highly, and promised that it should hang upon his wall.

"'Tis very nice indeed," he said, "an' my girl won't know herself when she finds it here. I hope you'll tell your mother I be greatly pleased and deeply obliged to her."

"Of course Hannah be getting all manner of fine gifts?"

"She'm doing mighty well, I believe, but she's keeping her secrets same as me. Her travels up to Exeter presently. But, come Sunday, I'm to go to the inn for the day, an' us mean to hear our banns axed out to Princetown church in the morning."

"Can 'e face it?"

"Why for not? Us ought to hear 'em if anybody ought, though Hannah reckons to be in a twitter come the moment."

"'Twill be new ground for you—a church."

"It will so."

They were silent a moment; then Nicholas cried out:—

"You'm a girl—the very thing!"

"A girl—yes, unless I'm a woman."

"I'll ax you to do me a kind service then. Come in the little house an' look around, will 'e? Just pretend to yourself that you are coming to live here, an' say honest an' plain how it strikes you. No woman have seen a wink of the place since I set to work, an' I don't know at all how it might strike a female mind. To me it looks so snug as a wren's nest, an' I can't see how to make it no better; but your sharp eyes may catch me out in many mistakes. So walk in an' have a look."

Mary's heart beat hard, and she gazed fondly at the little red hut under its tar-pitched roof. Her glance took in the new chimney-cowl, the fowl-house, the tiny garden.

She looked about and smiled and nodded, but did not trust herself to speak. Then Nicholas led the way, lowered his head, and entered his dwelling. Occupying as little space as possible, he sat in a corner, and gazed around about with pride. As for Mary, she had nothing but admiration for all she saw. Here and there her hands made some obvious improvement with a touch; and she noted the fact that neither window had a blind. These Nicholas thought unnecessary, but promised to provide upon Mary's advice.

Returning to the moor, she watched him at his painting for a while, and then with some return to peace of mind, set off homewards.

Her secret opinion concerning Hannah now stood at a point midway between her declaration to Nicholas and her former statement under the cherry tree. She did not think that the woman was wicked, but she believed

her to be weak. Her enthusiasm as Edgecombe had heard it was unreal. She hated Hannah no more, and she trusted her no more. As for Edgecombe, merged deeply in the egotism of this great experience, full of his approaching marriage, on the threshold of happiness unspeakable, he had no thoughts or eyes for anything beyond the interest of the moment as represented by Hannah and her new home.

By special grace of Mrs Bradridge, her future son-in-law dined at the "Ring o' Bells" upon the Sunday before Hannah started to Exeter. The lovers went to a church service in the morning and heard their banns read for the first time of asking.

Nicholas left the church in great good temper. He had enjoyed the simple service keenly; and the sermon, being suited to the needs of those who heard it, gave him much to reflect upon. There was nothing in an old pastor's simple words to shake Edgecombe's own understanding of his faith. Doctrine formed but a small part of the discourse, for it had mainly to do with questions of honesty and duty.

But while the warrener was exalted by the service and full of a determination to attend public worship henceforth as opportunity might allow, Hannah emerged gloomily from church. The variable weather of the day reflected the variable weather of her mind. She grumbled at a passing shower and Nicholas laughed at her.

"You to fear a scat o' rain!"

"'Tis my dress fears it, not me."

The gloomy mood gained upon her. She showed no interest in temporal affairs and was contemptuous of eternal ones. Their great undertaking, now so close, to-day appeared to fill her with disquiet. She was over-burdened by her own unworthiness, full of doubts and questions, half tearful and half vague.

"If you only knew me better—if you could only see what a wrong picture you have made of me," she said, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "An' there's plenty of time for you to change yet, Nicholas. I'm

far too feeble-minded for the likes of you—my weakness is past words and past praying for. An'—an' I wish to God you didn't love me so much! I feel when I look at you as a man might who was going to kill a dog that trusted him."

Edgecombe walked boldly along with his arm round Hannah. He merely squeezed the tighter at such nonsense and while she passed from gaiety to gloom, he became merry, though disturbed at first after the service. Her fears and tears he laughed at; he joked and jested; inquired what there might be for dinner; kissed her when the road happened to be empty.

These rough attentions awoke the woman into a simulated cheerfulness; but she ate nothing at the meal and remained almost as silent as her mother. Edgecombe attempted to be easy but failed, and it was not until he strolled with Hannah in the glens of Bray Wood, beneath Bray Farm, after dinner, that the warrener grew easy again.

CHAPTER XXII

THE NIGHT BEFORE

HANNAH BRADBRIDGE departed to Exeter, and during the period of her absence, Nicholas despatched three letters telling of progress, but saying nothing as to the wonders he had prepared. Disappointment, indeed, attended some of his efforts, and the gay plants that he had hoped to see in beauty for Hannah's advent seemed thus far doubtful of justifying their existence or his labours. But he found little leisure for anxiety. There was constant occasion for his services at Cross Ways Farm about this season, and, more than once, he might have been seen putting final touches to his little fowl-house by moonlight. Now, however, all was complete, and the poultry had already settled into their home. Within doors everything that the man's love could do was done. As for his betrothed, she wrote once from Exeter in a strain that seemed not happy and not lucid. Nicholas could make little of the letter, and wished her back again with all his heart.

Not until the actual eve of the marriage did Hannah return to Two Bridges. Rain fell heavily through the day, but after dusk Edgecombe set out in the midst of it for the "Ring o' Bells." Arrived there, he heard from Jane Wood that Hannah had come home within the hour, and, waiting for her in the bar, he exchanged his final greetings as a bachelor with those assembled there. Then it was that an unexpected incident shook his amiability.

Mrs Bradridge, whose eyes were red with weeping and whose manner showed that her mind lacked fortitude before the pending loss, exhibited a hysterical and unusual demeanour. During the evening she entered

the bar for a few moments only ; then she withdrew, and left her maid to serve there. Yet, before departing, Betty showed Nicholas that his presence was repugnant.

"See her you can't, an' nobody but you would have axed," she declared shortly. "Ban't her mother to have her alone even this night? To-morrow—to-morrow—an' you streaming wet too ; an' the things not come from Ashburton—an' I wish to God they'd all fall in the river together. She'll find out she've got a mother some day—an'—an'——" Here the woman broke down and vanished in the very extremity of grief.

Nicholas stared blankly.

"Blessed if I shouldn't almost have thought old lady had been drinking!" he murmured aloud.

"She have — an' what for if she have?" asked Axworthy. "Who'll blame her, seeing what's hanging over her? 'Tis a very great loss to her—no offence to you."

"I allow that ; but I didn't know 'twas in her to be broken down so bad," said Nicholas.

"It has come so close that she've got to endure it ; not that the face brandy an' water do put on a subject be the true one," said Mr Chugg. "But have a drink with me, Nicholas, all the same, for 'tis the last time you'll do so as a bachelor man."

"Thank you — a go of rum, hot," answered the warrener ; "an' I be wanting a bottle of sherry wine," he added sheepishly to Jane Wood.

"My stars ! There'll be doings up to your place an' no mistake," said Scobhull ; whereupon Mark Trout and others joined the laugh at Edgecombe's extravagance.

"Her'll want a bit of supper, won't her?" asked the bridegroom, pleased at this merriment. "An' Mr Snow have gived me a brave brace of ducks, an' I've got bread an' taters an' a figgy pudding, made down to Cross Ways, for her. An' I thought as a drop of real wine to wash it down. But doan't nobody tell Hannah."

"For my part, I shall make such a wedding-feast mid-day to-morrow that I shan't want nought till

breaksis next morning," declared Axworthy. He, in common with most of the workers in the neighbourhood, had been invited to the entertainment promised by Mrs Bradridge on the occasion of her daughter's wedding. All those present, save only Mr Trout, would be of the party.

Now the girl behind the bar spoke.

"You all appear to think you've got a wonnerful spread waiting, but for my part, knowing as we are to sit down twenty or more, the larder ban't all I'd like to see it," she told them.

"Just what I should have reckoned, knowing her so well," said Trout.

"But there's a cart coming special from Ashburton first thing in the day," explained Merryweather Chugg. "Your missis let my wife in the secret."

A feeling of relief made itself manifest throughout the company, and Trout looked disappointed.

"'Twill be cheap feeding—all stale cook-shop stuff—you wait an' see," he prophesied.

"Glad 'tis so," said Jane, answering Mr Chugg. "I've been fearful for the solids this week. There'll be more than enough drink to drown the party, of course, we being a public; but the food's the thing."

"Be Mr Oldreive coming?" inquired Axworthy.

"Can't say," replied Nicholas. "He've been axed to; but I haven't had no mouth-speech with the man since he gived me my wedding gift of a fine tobacco pipe. I hope as he'll drop in, I'm sure, if he can bring himself to it. He'm turned so good as gold now, they say."

"His farm will tell us all about that next spring; an' tell us truer than his friends," said Merryweather Chugg.

They drank, paying in turn, and conversed on general subjects; then Betty Bradridge suddenly entered the bar again. She was now more excited than before and exhibited an active malevolence against Edgecombe that none failed to note.

"Still here? For Christ's sake can't 'e see you'm

not welcome to-night? She wants you to be gone, an' so do I. Go! Go—can't 'e? Do 'e mean to drive me mad?"

In the deep silence that followed, a woman's quick footfall was heard approaching and Nicholas knew it for Hannah's. But Mrs Bradridge heard it also; she instantly darted back through a door at the corner of the bar, then shut it behind her and locked it from inside.

"Her ban't hardly mistress of her actions, poor woman," said Jane Wood.

"You'd best to go, Nick," suggested Chugg.

Edgecombe was breathing hard and staring at the bolted door.

"My girl wanted to come an' see me, an' her wouldn't let her," he said slowly.

"Well, who shall blame a mother on this night? Best be off," again advised the water bailiff.

In a dream Nicholas now moved to depart. Jane called attention to his sherry, which he had quite forgotten, so he picked the bottle up and thrust it in his pocket.

"Good-night, souls all," he said rather drearily; then went out of doors.

From force of habit he looked up at Hannah's window, but there was no light there, for she had not yet gone to bed.

An unfamiliar mental gloom enfolded the warrener for a while, because this outburst from Betty Bradridge saddened him. But the weather had changed and his tramp to Wistman's Wood under a sky grown nearly clear, calmed his spirit presently and made him cheerful. The picture of his home completely restored his equanimity; the loneliness of night, the friendly stars, the voice of Dart brought contentment, peace and thankfulness.

He lit the candles, to be next lighted when Hannah should arrive on the morrow, and scanned the illumination of pictures and decorations. He tried the three new chairs and heard the little sofa covered with horse-

hair creak under him as he sat upon it. He had already arranged supper for the following evening. The cold ducks figured as a centre-piece; there was a ham also, and a box of dried dates—a delicacy that Hannah loved. The bottle of sherry gave a fine finishing touch to the table; and a pudding would be set to simmer in the morning.

Edgecombe admired these preparations; put aside one enormous slice of bread and ham for his own breakfast, measured out the morning meal of the fowls, and then prepared to go to bed.

He read the account of the marriage in Cana of Galilee, then prayed, and then dragged out his new suit of clothes and spread it in the kitchen upon the little sofa. The garments were of a light slate-blue colour, with black buttons. Farmer Snow's nephew had given Nicholas some old linen shirts, and Hannah had renewed the frayed cuffs and enlarged the neck-bands by several inches. One of these shirts he also displayed and smiled to think of himself in such a thing.

Chance sometimes unlocks a musty cupboard of the brain, whereupon, suddenly, without one shadowy connecting link, we remember some road, house, person, scent or phrase of music that has been buried deep in the mind and lost to us through many years. So now Edgecombe's last waking thought fell upon no great matter, but conjured up those little, curious liver-worts that grew in the gulley on Devil's Tor where once he had faced death.

CHAPTER XXIII

ORDEAL BY FIRE

IN the early dawnlight of his wedding day, while yet the sun was behind the hills, Nicholas stepped forth; and, looking upward, he saw the morning stars ere they vanished into the blue. A clear and unstained sunrise burst upon the world like music, set earth's pure veil of moisture glimmering under the crystal air, and gathered up the valley vapours as they ascended to the sun. Roseal mists wreathed Longaford's crown like a halo, and adorned the spot where love was first breathed between the man and woman; then they vanished away to the invisible pavilions of the rain.

Edgecombe's cabin still stood within the purple shadow of the hills; his breath made a cloud about him and told how impatient autumn, before her hour, shall sometimes be seen stealing stealthily at dawn over the upland world while yet August reigns. But the sunshine touches her, and she gathers her cold gauzes to herself, and vanishes for a little longer.

Nicholas, donning rough attire, did necessary work, then returned to the great business before him. First he shaved with unshaking hand and was satisfied to see no scratch. Then he ate his breakfast out of doors, that not one crumb should spoil the purity of Hannah's kitchen. A cart was suddenly outlined upon the hill and Edgecombe's heart beat; for he doubted not that here was Axworthy bringing up Hannah's boxes from the "Ring o' Bells." It proved, however, to be a peat-cutter proceeding to his work in a remote fen. The man went by full half a mile away and from that distance saluted Nicholas with friendly shouts and gesticulations.

When the warrener's watch told eight o'clock he began to make final preparations. The starched shirt troubled him not a little, for such a flat, hard breastplate was beyond his experience; but he got into it, made the collar meet and put on a brilliant scarlet tie, specially purchased for the occasion. The vivid colour assorted ill with his red hair and skin, but it seemed good to him and he smiled broadly upon himself as the toilet proceeded. His blue suit proved somewhat narrow in the back and too tight in the leg; but he was tolerant of these facts. As a matter of course, holiday clothes were uncomfortable, and he did not imagine they could be otherwise. His boots caused him more concern, for they seemed so slight that he doubted whether they would sustain one walk from Wistman's Wood to Princetown church.

When he knelt to say his prayers, a seam gave in his right trouser leg. This he sewed up himself and felt thankful that it had not happened presently. When all was done, he picked up his Bible from a desire to see what special text would greet him on this day of days. He turned to the Gospel of Matthew and read, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice." The words seemed inapplicable, and, shutting the book, he opened it once more and scanned the verse beneath his right thumb. Again he fell upon Matthew, and observed his Saviour's utterance repeated: "I will have mercy and not sacrifice." Possessed with the coincidence, and made aware for the first time that these words recurred in the Evangelist's narrative, Nicholas put aside the book with some awe and in faith accepted its statement as proper to the day. Now he prepared to start; but first observing that certain small marigolds were in flower, he put one into his buttonhole and so added yet another note of colour to the discord blazing underneath his face. Now he produced a white handkerchief and tied the wedding-ring into a corner of it; he visited two rat-traps; he turned up his new trousers, and, fearing much for the boots beneath them, prepared to set off to Two Bridges. He looked out sharply for

the cart and Hannah's new tin box upon it, but still Axworthy did not appear. Now Nicholas locked the door, with a tremendous thought that his wife's foot would be the next to pass that threshold. He tried to picture her mystery, her joy and admiration as surprise followed upon surprise. He retraced all his preparations and could not tax himself with one wish of Hannah's unfulfilled.

The new shed had been left open, and Axworthy would lock it and bring back the key to Edgecombe after he had deposited Hannah's luggage there. Now, as he tramped along, going slowly to keep cool, Nicholas rehearsed his part, uttered it to see how his voice sounded, and wondered whether Hannah would speak loud and clear, or soft and full, like the cooing of the pigeons in Wistman's Wood. He reflected on the wedding feast, and laughed to picture the company's dismay should no banquet arrive from Ashburton.

"Maybe they cold ducks an' sherry wine won't go begging after all, if my girl's hungry," he said aloud.

A rabbit, frightened by his voice, scuttled from a tussock.

"Go free, you poor things, for once," he said. "God forgive me if I kill a midge to-day."

Then he looked ahead, and perceived a black figure approaching. For one moment the unwonted colour of this shape, smudged against the August heath, deceived Nicholas. Then he recognised Teddy Merle and went forward to meet him.

Below, at the end of the valley, Dart taking Cowsick Brook to her bosom, widened out at a bridge just beyond the "Ring o' Bells." The little inn rose grey against the morning, and smoke curled from one chimney, but no bustle of preparation marked the spot as yet. Then Edgecombe, looking beyond the black figure of his friend, stared in surprise, for it seemed to him that while half-a-dozen men were met upon the bridge in their broadcloth, certain others had not donned holiday raiment, but were busy in dis-

mantling a little arch of evergreens that had been raised before the inn door on the previous day. Astonished that he could not trust his eyes at a mile on such a morning, Edgecombe pushed forward and soon met Teddy. The boy was in his Sunday suit and wore a blue tie and a soft hat. He looked even more uncomfortable and ill at ease than he usually appeared when chastened into his best attire by his mother on the seventh day.

Far distant, certain men outside the inn were standing together and intently watching a meeting upon the Moor. Now they saw the small black figure stop beside the big blue one.

Teddy spoke with feverish anxiety to be gone, and behaved as though Nicholas was infected with a plague.

"Morning, Nick. They made me come, 'cause not one had the pluck to face 'e. I'd rather have died than do it, but they forced me to. A letter 'tis—from Hannah. Her throwed it out of her chicket-window, this morning at four o'clock, to Axworthy and Delve. And I comed down to the inn early, an' they've made me bring it. 'Twas urgent an' meant to reach you afore you started, so she said."

Teddy stopped, stretched out a letter to Nicholas, and was off again as fast as his legs could carry him. But he did not go back to Two Bridges : he ran down the hill to the river, crossed it, and, climbing Bair Down, returned directly to his home.

And Edgecombe, in no little surprise, opened the letter, and sat upon a rock, and read it.

"DEAR NICHOLAS,—You'll be bitter sorry for a little when you read this, but you'll be thankful all your life long after that I have done what I have done, and you have escaped marrying such a woman. The wickedness of it was not in leaving you for another man, because I found I loved him better after all, and you would have been the first to tell me to go to him instead of you when you knowed that. But the wickedness was to let you go on in the dark, and I

shall smart to my death when I think of it. That I will be bound to suffer for in next world as I have in this one. Love Timothy though I do, I love him less for that; but he made me do it on pain of not marrying me at all if I told you. Thank God you are rid of such a poor thing as me, and I hope, I'm sure, that you will forgive me some day and not hate all women for hate of me. Timothy was the first, and he brought it home to me gradually that I did love him best, and that he was the husband I ought to take. And the hate he had against you, for being cruel and hard to him in the past, took this shape against you. And my mouth was shut on pain of my losing him for all time. And he says he did tell you he loved me long, long ago. That is the naked story, dear Nicholas, and I'm sure I'm not excusing myself at all, even if I could. Never a colder-hearted, crueller woman lived than what I have been to you. And I be most cruel sorry for all the pangs I've caused you. For I did love you true enough, as you will know come Judgment, but him better. All the same I don't ask you to forgive me, that being against nature. I was married to Oldreive up to Exeter a fortnight ago. It was his wish you shouldn't know until you come down to the inn to-day. Last night I was mad and tried to see you and tell, but mother, as knew all, kept me away and said I must obey Timothy, else he would never forgive me. I am writing this in hopes to get it to you to-morrow by an early hand and spare you any more. There be two Oldreives, and one is my dear husband, and one's a dark man who can't forgive nor forget. The morning is breaking now, so I will conclude, hoping you will forgive me some time. Do not think I have not suffered about this. I be going to Cherrybrook first moment I can, come morning, and mother will tell the people about it. An' do not think the sin be all another's. It is me that am the greatest sinner.—I remain,

HANNAH OLDREIVE."

Edgecombe lifted his eyes from the letter and saw a

bright yellow spot afar off moving up the hill behind the "Ring o' Bells." It was Hannah's new tin box with other baggage upon a cart. The circumstance followed fitly on his letter and seemed more real than the words upon the paper. He watched the vehicle reach a gate and knew that it would turn in there if his home was its destination. But the possessions of Hannah passed on and followed her to Cherrybrook Farm.

The cart disappeared and Nicholas looked down the valley toward the inn. He saw the triumphal arch dragged down and hustled into the stable-yard. From time to time other black figures arrived, heard the truth and remained to talk.

One man, Sorrow Scobhull, had kept his eyes fixed with morbid intensity upon the remote figure of Edgcombe; and he reported what he saw for the benefit of those around him.

"The boy's gived un the letter an' he's reading it, sitting so still as a lizard on a stone. The boy's bolted."

A hush fell upon the men, Trout, Merryweather Chugg and others, by a sort of tacit understanding, held their peace before the tragedy that unfolded a mile away. They thought, with interest and even some regret, of the darkness that must now be falling upon their neighbour's heart. Among these people a companion's misfortunes were mostly matter of indifference. They themselves had endured the same yesterday, or would to-morrow. But, for once, active indignation woke, though only in the younger men.

"Still he doan't move," said Scobhull. "If I lose un a moment 'tis difficult to pick un up again, for his wedding clothes be stone-blue."

"Now he knows," said Mark Trout. "'Tis his first taste of trouble—same as we'm all born to, sure as the sparks fly up."

A youth named Delve marked Axworthy departing with luggage to Cherrybrook.

"There go the bitch's things! I'd like to drown her

in the river, an' that damn grey vixen of a mother of hers too," he said.

"Best not open your mouth so wide, else her won't serve you no more. A man's a fool to waste his anger over wickedness that don't hurt him," said Mark Trout cautiously.

"'Tis no news to me, in a way," explained Mr Vosper, addressing Chugg as they stood and talked aside.

"No news!"

"Not if I look back. Two months ago Mrs Merle told me that her daughter was saying bitter things about Hannah Bradridge. Set a woman to catch a woman."

"Us'll never know the rights of it, I reckon," returned the water bailiff. "There's an inside and outside to every deed. Old lady was properly drunk last night—whether to drown sorrow or conscience, who can tell? 'Tis the Almighty's business. 'The deceived and the deceiver are his.'"

Scobhull, with eyes screwed closely up, still strained his sight upon the distant figure.

"Now the man have got upon his feet and be standing staring down here," he said.

"Which way will the chap go?" mused Mr Vosper.

"I know which way I would," said the fiery youth who had abused Hannah.

"You'd go down-along to Cherrybrook Farm, Sammy Delve, an' get yourself in the newspapers. We all know you," replied Trout. "For my part," he continued, "I judge that Edgecombe be well out of it. A snake would be a pleasant family friend compared to she. Like mother, like darter."

Farmer Snow and his wife drove up from Cross Ways at this moment. They were clad in full splendour for the ceremony; and Mrs Snow had insisted on providing Hannah's bouquet—a noble, if solid mass of white roses and candid lilies. These had their anthers plucked out, that the gold pollen should not sully the purity of the petals.

"Good mornin', all!" shouted the farmer as he drew rein. "A brave day for a brave deed, my dears. But wheer's the triumphant arch to? And wheer's the man hisself?"

"The arch be throwed down for winter fring," said Scobhull; "an' the man have just turned his back an' be walking home again very slow."

"An' so can the rest of us," concluded Mark Trout, not without satisfaction; "for theer's no wedding vittles for any belly to-day. An' I be the only one that won't suffer, 'cause I wasn't axed."

As Sorrow Scobhull had reported, Edgecombe with uncertain stride began to retrace the way to his red hut above the wood. His mind seemed not large enough to hold this tremendous circumstance at one effort. Thrice he stopped and asked himself why he was returning; once he delayed and re-read his letter, breathed deep, and stood up alone among the old oaks. By ten o'clock he was at his dwelling again, and the appearance of everything there acted as a negation of the written word and shouted at him how all was well. It seemed impossible that ink on paper could overthrow so many facts. At intervals he thrust his hand into his pocket, hoping in his heart to find the letter gone and this hideous dream ended. He doubted if he was awake, and once cried out to the Lord to rouse him from his dreadful trance and lift this incubus from off him. But the August day advanced to the glory of noon and set hot air trembling for miles; Dart, having dwindled fine again after the recent rain, glittered and purred upon her cheerful course; the second spring of the oaks had touched them and opened carmine rosettes of infant leaves amongst their summer green. The world was wide awake; and Nicholas Edgecombe with it.

He sat in the sunlight and struggled to build from this chaos of ideas now tumbling and surging over his mind. Not one threatening shadow of this event had ever reached his understanding. That a woman who had given her soul's secrets to his keeping could yet hold back so much, was a circumstance beyond his

apprehension. Her hints, dark moods, half truths and impatiences he had quite misprized, and all the opportunities that she gave him for a question, he had ignored.

Even now, with the letter in front of him again, he refused to believe it. He could not learn in a moment to loathe her for the thing that she had done ; he could not in a moment break the habit of a year and cease to love her. That Hannah was never a woman to be persuaded against her own will he forgot, if indeed he knew it. Adhering to his old estimate of her character, he imagined a dark plot against her, built upon treachery and falsehood ; he supposed Hannah herself innocent of actual wickedness ; he invented a hapless creature fallen among savage beasts ; he fancied her powerless to get free, dazzled, like a bird under the eye of a serpent. Each frantic effort that she had made towards liberty was frustrated ; for Oldreive had doubtless exercised the magic known to bad men and prevented Hannah from crying out that Nicholas might save her. Her letter, indeed, directly confounded this opinion ; but Edgcombe suspected the letter itself and now believed that her actual words were only partly true. He supposed that she was too proud to tell him of her weakness and of the treachery that had stolen her away from him. So gradually he built up a theory of this disaster.

Then upon his brain, as the sun still shone near meridian, there fell like blows of a sledge-hammer, the fact itself. What matter how this thing had come about ? What consolation to him was any hypothesis before the actual catastrophe and his life in ruins ? Hope, happiness, faith lay mangled and crushed together, and the rest of his days were but an avenue of ashes that stretched empty before him. The desolation of the truth forced itself slowly, like trickling, molten metal, into every corner of his mind, and tortured as it went. With a stab it brought him back from wild pursuit of clues and hints and those foreshadowings of this thing, that now began to emerge one by

one out of his memory. Unconsciously he had received them and never known them for what they were. He remembered words that sunk to whispers when he met other men; he recollected laughter hushed; his sweetheart's reveries and unbidden tears; a young boy's bitterness; a woman's frenzy beneath the cherry tree by Dart. Again and again over this angry sea of thought, like minute guns from a foundering ship, there throbbed the truth. After long-drawn agonies of repetition it harboured in his mind at last, to be dislodged no more.

He received it, accepted it, rose to his feet, as a man will before some tremendous fact—to face it standing. He spared a moment to examine his theory of life before this avalanche, and found time for wonder that his days should have been so free from tribulation until the present. His spiritual sources of consolation and support now awaited proof, and for one brief flash his thoughts thither tended. But his gorge rose. Christ's self in the flesh had been a weariness then—any articulate word, human or divine, had driven him into blasphemy. Only a cry of flowing water upon granite and the wind among the oaks could he endure. These voices had aforetime been his companions; he had forgotten them; and now he must listen again; he envied the old trees their iron fibre, but he shuddered at the awful duration of their lives.

As the sun turned into the west, an ancient man came riding to Wistman's Wood, and Nicholas, knowing him for his master, sped hastily into the Moor that he might escape a meeting. Mr Snow after some struggle with himself, had followed his wife's counsel, and sought the warrener.

"'Tis ill that no human speech should sound in his ear this day, an' no human hand be lifted to hold his," she declared. "He'm in more trouble than he deserves, I reckon, if it ban't dictating to the A'mighty to say so."

But the farmer took his ride in vain. He saw no sign of Nicholas, and having peered about, peeped through the window, observed the meal spread on the

table, patted Smiler, as he came whining and stretching from his kennel, and admired with sorrow the evidences of Edgecombe's labours, he departed over the hill again.

From a pile of rocks, on the other side of the river, Nicholas watched his visitor, and after Mr Snow had vanished, he returned listlessly towards the cabin. By Dart he stopped a while, bathed his head, and drank a draught before returning home. Then he mounted through the wood, and sat motionless where he had sat before.

With set of sun, a new train of ideas took shape and possessed him. His mind was imbued with the tincture of night, and it darkened slowly as the sky darkened. Yet no planet twinkled in the firmament of his thoughts; he had no senses for the evening star, that now hung over departed day like a lamp of gold; and he did not see the mist limning in the marshes and stretching out pearly fingers to the river.

For a time Hannah passed out of thought. The queen of his life had been abducted from her palace, and her throne lay empty and overturned. First his own blindness maddened him; then, with the night, primal passion heaved and surged up in Edgecombe, and he thought upon Timothy Oldreive alone. He scanned the past with patience to recollect each occasion of their meeting; he pursued the man through the whole range of their intercourse, and, as the successive incidents synthetically grouped themselves, he marvelled at the spectacle of such skilful cunning, such cruel and malignant power. At the conclusion of this survey, he struck the stone under his hand, and raged with the rage of a hart whose hind has fallen by right of conquest to a stronger stag.

A great struggle began in Nicholas Edgecombe, under the eye of the stars. They that had passed over him in the gully upon Devil's Tor, again swept by in procession punctual and solemn; but while comfort on wings of light had once fallen from their hosts upon him, an everlasting universe of suns was powerless

now to send one throb of warmth to the man's heart, to pulse one message of patience across heaven. Under a superficial peace and silence he brooded; and, in this strait, no shadow from sacred eld, no dim image of his heart's accustomed friends, no phantom from the Book of Life appeared to stand between him and his lonely wrath. This moralist of the Mount now fell away from his firm station, and the rock that he clung to crumbled like sand beneath his hold. Ancient stable things and certainties—those beacons of the old fair weather, swept past him, as the stars swept past, and were annihilated, or concealed. Aboriginal hate glowed and roared in him like a furnace blast, leapt to his brain and ruled there. He looked to the south, thought of his enemy, and showed his canine teeth in an expression of brute rage that had never degraded his countenance until that hour. The wrong done to himself was all he thought of then, and he pictured Oldreive plotting and planning so that the victim should suffer to this bitter pass. It appeared to him that his enemy was not fit to live, and Edgecombe madly raged to destroy him, as yet lacking sufficient control of mind to plan the deed.

Presently a wave of indifference, begot from mental fatigue, overtook him. His intellectual equipment, strained to the limits of its strength, ceased to work, grew for a time paralysed, was powerless to carry him further. He arose, unlocked his house and entered. It was now about the hour that he and Hannah should have returned home; but a lifetime seemed to separate him from the morning. The preparations spread around him there looked unreal, intangible, like the ghost of an old dream. He lighted a lamp and faced it all again. Once he thought that he heard the woman's voice calling behind him, and stood still, and felt a cold hand pass down over his neck and back. But it was only the distant barking of a fox. The food and wine on the table fascinated him, and, carrying them out of doors, he gave one bird to his dog and flung the other far away for weasels and crows to feed upon. He was

going to pour the liquor out upon the earth, but changed his mind and drank three parts of it.

Now he awoke from transient lethargy and once more grew mentally alive and sensitive. Wine promised again to be the mother of murder, for it touched his agony with its own colours, and cried out that he was a man to do, not a sheep to suffer. The figure of the woman he had adored was still hidden from him; and while he remembered that he must live his life, he forgot that she must also live hers. For the moment she had sunk into an object with no more power to feel, or suffer, than a bag of gold stolen by a rascal. Edgecombe saw only one jeering monster, and this caricature of man—this apparition without a human trait of good—dominated all things from his standpoint. He could hear it laugh and gibe; he could see the creature turn away to enjoy Hannah. With no fearless stroke in the breast did this friend rob him of life, but by the strategy of Judas. Edgecombe had thought that there was peace between them; the man had brought him a wedding gift with his own hand.

Then, being drunk, Nicholas tried to play an old trick upon his conscience, and, in the false light of private wrong, believed that a message from heaven had transformed him into the Almighty's own weapon. And yet the thought died away in birth, for the man's nature was too compact of truth to accept such an error. He knew the figment for a lie.

"I want to kill him for my own vengeance," he cried out suddenly; and the echo of the hills carried his words to the Moor.

"I will kill him!" he cried again, and again in the silence his words reverberated to the lonely heart of the land.

Now the thing called moral sense went down like a reed before this flood. He was concerned with nothing but his hatred. He only mourned that Oldreive stood not at that instant within the reach of his hands, but must be approached over a night-hidden wilderness. Even in that frantic hour he knew the fabric of his

mind well enough to let no day dawn upon it. He had found the morning an often healer of mental hurts, and while he was aware that this horror and ruin must remain in the front of his life so long as he lived, yet deep instincts warned him to do quickly the deed uppermost in his thoughts if he would do it at all. The idea accepted, other evils were bred out of it and blossomed into hideousness. Forgetting that Hannah had been married a fortnight, Edgecombe hungered to cut Oldreive off before the consummation of his wedded triumph. He told himself that nothing but the hand of God could save his enemy now. He would tear the man out of his wife's arms if need be and slaughter him before her. To judgment he should depart, hurled there as unwarned as Edgecombe had been hurled into the confusion and wreckage of his life. That the deed would number his own days was another justification of it. Every anchor had failed him; the foundations of the deep of faith were broken up; ruin beyond redemption awaited him, and he welcomed it in that infernal hour. Strong to act, he took his gun and hastened through the night. An utterance of the Saviour of men fell into his mind and was applied. He told himself that he had already committed murder in his heart. The sin was recorded against him, and the actual deed could neither increase nor lessen the moral crime. He marvelled at his own subtlety of reasoning as he swept forward; then threw over thought for a mental welter of sheer ferocity.

Seen from outside, without knowledge of his passions and inner fury, Nicholas Edgecombe would have appeared to move as the stern and resistless messenger of fate. With huge stride he swung along under the faint light of stars, an almost mechanical incarnation of physical strength, perfect in balanced forces, perfect in control. But could the nocturnal glimmer have pierced his breast and revealed the tempest there, human intelligence had marvelled at the contrast between the animal's faultless celerity and the man's mental overthrow. Quite unconsciously Edgecombe

passed through the dangers and confusions of his road. Instinct made him swerve, leap, turn, lengthen and shorten his stride as the way demanded. Over bog and moss, deep peat cutting, and walls of stone he preserved a course almost straight from Crockern Tor to the farm of Cherrybrook.

Once, like a weak echo from his well-ordered past, there came the recollection of the verse he had read that morning and taken as a guide for his wedding day. He remembered how he had fallen twice upon it; but now he laughed aloud at the Powers who could design, by a conceit so pitiable, to turn him from his purpose.

“‘I will have mercy and not sacrifice’—nay, but I will have sacrifice, and leave mercy for them as be too weak to get justice!”

He cried out the words into the night, and flung the text away from him like a dead match.

At his destination he made a wide turn and passed before the dwelling-house. There was a light in the kitchen window and it stood open. Cherrybrook ran in front of the building, and a little scrap of old, disused garden extended between the farmyard wall and the river. This, long neglected, held a few perishing currant bushes and stunted herbs. Edgecombe took a cartridge from his pocket, loaded the right barrel of his gun, crossed the river by a plank bridge, and, going on hands and knees, entered the bushes. A low stone wall stood three yards from the kitchen window, and to this he crept. Lifting his head, he heard the murmur of voices, and bent quickly lest he should be seen. Moths fluttered in the ruddy light that shot a warm and velvety beam from within; behind him the stream prattled, but it did not drown the voices in front. He looked again, remembering that those in the room could discern nothing against the darkness without, and, gazing, he saw a kitchen table with a cloth spread over one end of it and generous fare displayed there. Yet it seemed that another supper was to go untasted that night. At the further end of the table, behind a lamp with a ruby glass shade, was a

mass of bright hair, downfallen and tumbled about two white hands. Hannah Oldreive sat there, her head bent low ; and, with his back to the peat fire, stood her husband. His face was dark, and he lashed his leg with a riding whip. Exceeding comfort and prosperity marked the setting of these two miserable figures.

Suddenly the man broke silence.

"What the hell do you want? Is this your way of asking me to cut my throat?"

Hannah lifted a pale face that made her lips scarlet by contrast. The genial lamp-glow could not disguise her unhappiness to Edgecombe, and he saw channels of many tears upon her features.

"Kill yourself? And so escape your part of the payment?" she said. "Don't leave me now, Timothy. Don't ax me to bear the whole of what we've earned. 'Tis the Lord's vengeance on the likes of you an' me, that we live for ever an' be never allowed to forget. Us will suffer last an' longest, an' tis right we should. He'll come out of the storm somehow, for he've got all the world to be sorry for him ; an' he knows that he's escaped from a bad woman. But who'll waste a tear on us?"

Oldreive shook back his head, then he flung his whip into a corner and went to Hannah and put his hand on her shoulder.

"You'd make my victory dust and ashes if you could, but you can't. I forgive you for trying to, because you don't understand a man's heart, or the strength of a wronged man. You need not think that this triumph is bitter to me, or that I am cast down. I glory in what I have done ; I——"

"For Christ's sake don't fool yourself any more with that," she interrupted passionately. "Don't I know you well enough by now? Don't I know the stuff you're made off, and what you've tried to hide from me this last two weeks, though it has made your hair go greyer under my eyes? Your conceit even ban't proof against it. You ban't all devil yet, though you'd like to be."

"I'm very well satisfied, whatever you think," he said speaking in a loud voice and going over to his place at the supper table.

"Then you'm the first that a full revenge has ever satisfied," she answered without moving.

It seemed that some of his old spirit and pride had failed the man upon this night. He feebly tapped a plate with a knife and only answered after long interval. Then, when he did speak, his changed intonation and the nerveless vibration of his voice, revealed the truth and explained how until that moment he had been playing a part. Now he acted no more.

"At least we've got ourselves," he said.

Again there fell a long silence, but his cry of weakness had gone to the woman's heart. Until then he had not deceived her, but she was content that he should think he had done so.

"Tim! Tim—I'm the wickedest—comfort me, for God's sake, Tim!"

"If I could—if only——"

Her husband went to her side and knelt there and put his arm round her; and Nicholas Edgecombe slunk away from the wall, passed across the river and wandered back on to the Moor again. Then, with a shambling and a languid step, he turned homewards. Active emotion at the things he had heard served him as stimulant for a little way; but soon it died out and left him merely interested to find what a laggard in justice is man. The woman's face was enough for him without her words. Her last cry had turned him away innocent of crime. He almost thought that he understood Oldreive also. But nothing mattered any more. He was not even thankful that his hand had been stayed. All spring and life had vanished from his mind and body. It seemed that he no longer had any place in the tragedy. He viewed the past from outside and felt a numb insensibility creeping over him. He yawned and thought with satisfaction of sleep.

The battle and scorch of the day left him absolutely exhausted and supine. He must sleep and rest before

he could despair. The foundations of his conduct as a reasonable being were torn up and he was hurled from his original and heart-whole faith. A God who watched unwearyingly the span of human life ; a God who out of infinite power created and out of infinite love preserved the least of His earth-born hosts, was no God for him henceforth.

Other deities might presently appear to him ; a Spirit of Duty, of Justice, or of Truth might arise to fill his human need and answer his cry in the coming darkness ; but that old benignant phantom, the mirage of a loving Father, was gone for evermore.

END OF FIRST BOOK.

THE RIVER

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

AN ALTAR OVERTURNED

UPON a greater stage than ever held Greek drama, Nicholas Edgecombe now walked alone with his tribulation and endured it. No cothurnus magnified his stature, no garment swelled his shape, no graven mask concealed his ruddy countenance. He moved, a lonely point, over the Moor; and, as he played his part to the sun, the moon, the stars, for chorus came the cry of the river.

Most steadfastly he believed that no such trouble as his own had ever fallen upon man before; that no wrong so subtly wrought, so wickedly executed and so utterly undeserved had happened until this time. And yet the dust under his feet had played the same tragedy; the ashes in the Damnonian cairns had endured like torment two thousand years before. Those bygone soldiers and shepherds who similarly trod this unchanging vast and heard the river's calling, had also suffered to the depth of their rude hearts, had also leapt from passion to impiety and cursed their gods hidden behind the thunder. They, too, had thirsted to take life, had dyed the flint red and imbrued with blood the heather that now prospered above their graves.

A great desire for loneliness was the first mark of his grief apparent to Edgecombe's world. He shunned all men, and only went down into civilisation for his bread. Then, finding this not necessary, he carried a sack of flour to his cabin and for a long time was seen of no one but his master.

Teddy Merle, indeed, made resolute endeavours to renew old friendship, but his intrusion broke too soon

upon Edgecombe's sorrows ; an angry word passed, and the boy, stricken down before the first rough speech that he had ever heard from Nicholas, took himself off with a panting breast and quivering lip. Indignation passed quickly into despair, and once out of the warrener's sight, Teddy flung himself down behind a great stone and wept.

Upon the same evening he told his secret to his mother, and she comforted him a little, bade him be patient, and herself won matter for thought from the incident.

"You'm vexed about something, seemingly," Mary said, noting her brother's sad looks, when the little family at Bray Farm were gathered together in the evening hour. "What be wrong with 'e?"

"Nought," he said.

"I know better'n that," declared his mother. "An' I know where the trouble fell, for I seed you coming home-along from Wistman's Wood."

"Ban't nobody's business," he said, sullenly.

"If us can't comfort 'e, who should?" asked Mary, and he replied—

"Don't want no comfort. This here be a damned world every way, an' I don't care who hears me say so."

"You never larned that from Edgecombe," said Mrs Merle. "For all his troubles, no man yet have heard him swear."

"I have then, so you'm wrong there!" cried her son. "He told me to go to hell an' let him bide in peace, this very day. An' I'd only gone to help him with the wires, an' work for him same as his dog does. He doan't care for me no more, an' I'd have cut my hand off for the man. For that matter, if he'd only heeded—but ban't no good whining about it: he've thrown me over—that's all."

"I don't believe 'tis so," declared the boy's mother. "He ban't that sort. He'm raw still, an' the very voice of his kind grates on his torn nerves. Pity be often worse to bear than the trouble that calls it forth. I

know, for when your faither died, 'twas a deal easier to bide alone with the thought of it than listen to well-meaning neighbours telling about it."

"He'll soon come round—such a solid, religious man as him," said Mary; "he'll forgive them both presently. There's no place in him to harbour hate against anybody. I be sure of that; for I hurt un to the quick once, yet he forgived me."

She ceased and was lost in thought.

"You went to the man too soon," summed up Mrs Merle. "Chugg have tried, an' Vosper have tried, an' Snow have tried to say the word in season, but the season haven't come. A woman would have knowed better than to go babbling to him yet awhile. Such a thing as this be worse than death to a man. For us can take what God sends without much repining if we'm Christians; but what the devil sends do often drive the honestest heart into doubt an' put a soul out o' reach o' comfort."

"He'm a very prayerful chap," mused Mary; "he set up a pile of stones 'pon Devil's Tor to mark his rescue in the eye of heaven."

"'Twas a Devil's Tor for him sure enough," said the boy.

"Even prayer turns sour on the mind now and again," answered Mrs Merle to her daughter. "But he'll come back to hisself, give him time. He'll be sorry for his crooked word to Teddy long before Teddy has forgived him for it."

Conversation died upon this prophecy; the lad departed to his den, in a loft above the stables, and Mary took her thoughts to bed with her. The tribulations of Nicholas had been a very real grief to her also, yet of necessity they were a divided sorrow, because love is too selfish to rejoice at its own defeat. Now she perceived that the irrevocable had not been recorded. Hannah married to another, Edgecombe was free. She knew that she could never win him, yet longed with a single heart to lessen his sorrow if that might be possible. But no inspiration in this sort brightened her reflections, for it

seemed that his burden could not be shared by any creature. Then, retracing the days of her knowledge of him, Mary remembered how a great anniversary fell in the following week, and determined to celebrate it according to her own pleasure.

The woman's enterprise led to matters beyond her anticipation, for chance, touching another mind also, drove Nicholas to select the same occasion for a deed that he had already contemplated. He, however, was ignorant that he had chosen the anniversary of his own rescue; though an added bitterness must have attended his labours, in the light of that knowledge.

Thinking upon the days that were gone, now sunk into a great depth of time from the present standpoint, Edgecombe remembered his meeting-place with Hannah and recalled those stones that he had lifted there to commemorate the glorious event. Now they possessed a different significance and the futile memorial sticking in his mind, troubled him. He decided therefore to throw it down, and one day set forth to do so. With him he took his dog, his gun and a hundred rabbit wires.

A sort of vague desire to endure that bygone experience again and die instead of live, touched him as he climbed the Tor. Then he mourned his own poor spirit and longed for a clean heart.

It was past midday when the warrener arrived and approached the pile of granite above his old resting-place in the gulley. Then he started and held back, for another being was already at that spot. Sitting pensively there with her hands in her lap, her toes just off the ground and her eyes fixed upon the sky, where it shone in great silver clouds upon the distant sea, a woman appeared. Her shoulder was turned towards him and a sunbonnet hid her face, but Edgecombe recognised the slim figure and wondered why Mary Merle should be here. A basket by her side suggested that she had come for whortle-berries; but when he reached her and stood at her elbow, he saw that the basket was empty. Mary started, turned pale and then

red at this sudden meeting. She spoke first and her voice was fluttered and nervous, for it seemed that he had sprung from the earth and his sudden apparition alarmed her.

"My stars! you've made my heart jump into my mouth, Mr Edgecombe. To think of it! 'Tis just as we met afore."

"You was lost in thought an' didn't hear me. But your thought wasn't berries by the look of your basket, Mary."

"I'm sorry; I'll be off; I never knowed you comed here now—else I wouldn't have thought to come."

"Bide till you'm rested. 'Tis a tidy climb. The flickets be in your face so rosy as morning. I frighted you."

"Yes, you did. My heart be jumping like a frog in my breast, I assure 'e."

He flung down his tools and sat upon the ground beside her. Her presence did not pain him, because she was there by accident. He found time to wonder what had brought Mary; and she, for her part, was concerned to know his errand. Then the glittering rabbit wires explained it.

"You'm up here to work, I suppose," she said.

He was glad she could not guess all his purpose; yet he made no attempt to mislead her.

"Partly," he answered. "An' if 'twasn't berries, what brought you so far?"

"My thoughts," she answered. "Sorrow an' joy together like, Nicholas—sorrow for what is an' joy for what was."

"Well—us was always good friends, you an' me."

"Always, I'm sure; though you had a deal to forgive."

He remembered the day in spring by Dart.

"Lovely weather, wi' the cherry blooth dropping in the water like snow," he said, pursuing her memory aloud. Then he turned to Mary.

"You meant to do right by me, an' I was too stiff-necked against you then. But mind this—her ban't

the guilty party—her—no; I'll leave that. 'Tis buried in my mind. No call to dig it up for others to see."

"Do you know that this is the very day us found you there in that great trough with your leg broke? The very day an' the very hour. As I sat here afore you comed I could almost hear you crying out, as you did then, an' telling us to bide in the hollows, else the savage cattle might hurt us. Do you mind that?"

He shook his head. Then suddenly he told her the reason for his presence.

"I be come to heave down they stones. 'Tis terrible coorious I should have thought to do it to-day. They was set for a sign of God's goodness—an'—an'——"

"Well?" she asked calmly. "An' what, Nicholas? God haven't changed, have He? Your life was saved here, wasn't it?"

"Yes, 'twas. Why for? Get off, an' you shall see me scatter 'em."

Her heart throbbed, and tears came into her eyes. It had been a satisfaction to her these many days that she, too, might claim a share in this memorial, that it marked a great deed in which she, also, had played her part.

"Bide just one little minute, Nicholas," she said. "You've a right to pull down what you set up—only us did save you under Providence, didn't us?"

"You mean you had a hand in it as well as her?"

The woman felt deeply grieved that he should regard this fact as a new idea.

"I've got all the best happiness in my life from thinking so," she said simply.

He stared at her; he began to perceive that there were other matters in the world beside his grief; his sense of justice awoke at Mary's confession.

"So you did, then. Somehow t'other filled my mind an' thought. I'll remember in future, an' maybe a day will come when I'll thank you that I'm alive an' not dead. Just now I don't feel no thanks for it. Any way them stones must be cast down."

"They'm too heavy for one man to move, surely?"

"I piled 'em single-handed through the strength of falling in love. They was light to build up, but they'll be heavier to fling abroad."

"I wish I could help 'e, then ; but they'd smash me to pieces."

"No, 'tis my work."

He took off his coat, tightened his leather belt, and bared his tremendous arms. Then he lifted the great masses of granite and hurled them into the gully.

"'Twas like that they stoned the saints of old," he said.

"A terrible end for 'em, poor souls."

"I don't know. Their eyes were opened and they saw all heaven waiting for 'em. I don't reckon it hurt much. I'd die this minute, an' my great sorrow would save me from suffering, same as their great joy saved them."

Mary's thoughts were running upon her last visit to Nicholas. Without delicate feeling she asked a question:—

"How be your little garden faring?"

But the enquiry did not hurt him.

"I've got no garden no more. I pulled up the things. What's the good of nosegays to me? An' look here, Mary Merle, since we've met, there may be doubts in folks' minds about this business, an' I'd like them as care about it to know my view. I ban't over sore against that woman. They'm the weaker vessels, an' they've got no strength for fighting, an' no brains for understanding, an' only a misty sense of what be right, an' very little knowledge of how men can love 'em. Leastways some women are fashioned like that. Hannah would be my wife this minute if 'twasn't for the devil. 'Tis him as makes history, an' I've got to believe in him something terrible of late days. Once I didn't take him so serious as I do now ; but then I didn't know there was so much wickedness in the world as there be. So we live an' larn—an' larning be a painful job as opens our minds an' shuts our hearts seemingly. All this is to say I blame the man more than her. He made her

act her lie against me. A forefinger of Satan he be—no less.”

Edgecombe ceased, and pursued his dark indignation silently.

“Her’ll suffer for it, no matter what measure of the sin was hers,” said Mary.

“Yes, that man’s wife was cast for suffering. God have willed her doom, an’ He never changes.”

“Us all thought she hated Mr Oldreive, I’m sure.”

“She did once.”

“Yet, where a woman have loved, she may again, I suppose. Her hate turned into love under his false tongue—or any way her thought it had.”

“Born to failure he be; an’ ’tis vain to tell about free will when you’m faced wi’ the likes of Oldreive. His history be written ’pon his evil face, an’ in his eyes, an’ under ’em—writ in his jaw an’ scowl. But whether his Maker, or his master, the devil, had the planning of his days be beyond man’s wit to fathom.”

“Don’t ’e talk so fearful, Nicholas. You’m too young an’ good to let your mind go by these dark ways.”

“‘Good’! I’m poisoned. My mind be so full of slime an’ beastliness as Dart in summer drought. There! ’tis gone—not one stone left upon another. If I could pitch down what’s inside me so easy! Now go your way an’ gather berries, an’ I’ll teel my traps; then, presently, I’ll walk back along part of the road with you.”

They separated, and the girl’s heart was cheerful against her judgment, and the man, deeply brooding before all that this anniversary meant to him, went about his work and followed it with less than his accustomed skill.

CHAPTER II

"SCARLET IDEAS"

THE lives of Timothy and his wife settled slowly into some method and regularity of design. Hannah first relied upon his love and her strength of character to raise Oldreive towards higher living and a just estimate of his responsibilities. Thus she hoped to bring a dawn of prosperity upon Cherrybrook Farm, and transform the master of it into a man of fair repute; yet within six months she found her ideal future as vain as his promises past. Any measure of success depended upon her own efforts alone, for her husband went his way.

But this situation did not develop immediately upon the marriage, nor result from the first resolutions that awoke in the farmer's mind after possession of Hannah. He had worked like a giant to the fulfilment of his end; he had suffered himself to become wholly absorbed by the problem, its difficulties and dangers. From the first determination and subsequent steadfast labours toward revenge, Oldreive had grown to love his plot for itself, to glory in destruction of each new obstacle, to rejoice at the promise of success. Not seldom he lost sight of the end in mastery of the means, and his very love-making had been haunted by the spectacle of the red man's discomfiture. Then, Hannah won and Edgecombe stricken, Timothy Oldreive came back to himself again, as he had often come back to himself in the darkness of a long winter ride homewards after the fever of hunting.

Gradually he discovered all that was meant by the thing he had done; slowly he experienced what evil seldom breeds in the enaction, but inevitably in the

result. From a sort of brief and thrilling dream-play he awakened into reality. He stretched his hand for the fruit of his achievement, and, while pretending otherwise, knew in his heart that it was tasteless. As men over-estimate their powers, both in the direction of right and wrong-doing, so they may misjudge their capabilities to enjoy or endure the reward of either operation; and now, faced with the anticlimax of his deed, Oldreive won from it none of that satisfaction he had counted upon. Hannah secured and the warrener crushed, life had promised him complete contentment; yet, though all fell out as he had planned, these things brought unrest rather than exultation, and the secret misery of that night overheard by Nicholas did not vanish with the morning.

Oldreive's future had attracted a sociologist by reason of its profound uncertainty. His neighbours, lacking science, believed that everything depended upon his wife; and, indeed, Hannah herself arrived at that conclusion. But as time passed, as marriage settled into monotony and Oldreive's great resolutions broke down one after another, his wife began to know that she was powerless. Weak her husband might be, but not with the weakness that could benefit from her strength. He neither respected her nor perceived in her any superiority. Hannah forgot a little how she married this man; memory and press of affairs clouded the recollection of how he had conquered her old devotion and sense of honour, how he had won her to untruth and cruelty. But these facts Timothy very distinctly remembered, and when she reproved him sharply, upon an occasion of difference in which the wife was right and her husband wrong, he, reminding her of the past without very delicate choice of words, reduced her virtue to silence, her self-respect to chaos.

At first, however, some improvements were apparent in the farmer's life after his secret marriage; and, mistaking the cause, all men applauded the effect, and murmured old, fatuous saws of how a reformed libertine makes the best husband, and so forth. Even his wife

was deceived for a time and lived in a fool's paradise shadowed by the past alone. But pure pride supported Timothy at this juncture; pure pride set him working with his own hands upon the land and exhibited him in his shirt-sleeves to the friends and acquaintance who passed by. He was greater every way than those of his small world—so he believed—and he would be superior also in this: the knowledge of husbandry. There was, however, a sub-acid flavour in his laughter at his own expense, and a note in his allusions to married life that men marked. He only hunted once a week; he lived at home; he developed some excellent and proper enterprises upon his farm. For the moment none could quarrel with his life: yet a neighbour discovered and did not hesitate to declare that Oldreive's reformation extended not far beneath exteriors, and was built upon other foundations than humility and sorrow for the past.

It happened, while spreading manure upon his hay-meadows in mid-November, that Timothy worked beside an outer wall of his farm, near Cherrybrook Bridge upon the high road. His coat, flung here, was blown over into the road by a sudden gust, and Merryweather Chugg picked it up as he passed homewards.

“Here, mate,” he said, “your jacket be down in the dirt for the first tramp to take—oh, ’tis you,” he broke off suddenly as Timothy turned round.

“Yes, hard at it.”

“Nice muck too you’m scattering, to be sure.”

Oldreive was short of news just now, for he had not been much to the “Ring o’ Bells” of late. Shame kept him from his mother-in-law. Therefore he welcomed a chance of words and gave the water bailiff a civil answer.

“You can have a load for your cabbage-plot, if you like. I’m not frightened of dirty work you see, as all the fools round here was pleased to say I should be. I’ll show a few of you what modern farming means yet.”

“Thank you for the manure; an’ I hope, if an old

man may speak, that you'll show us what honesty be also, Timothy Oldreive."

Mr Chugg expected an explosion, but the other replied temperately:—

"I know you mean well, though you're a Wesleyan an' very narrow-minded."

"Yes, an' proud of it," returned the other promptly. "Proud of being a Wesleyan an' proud of being narrer in my ideas; for narrer you need to be if you'm going to keep your balance on the narrer road. 'Tis a stickle path up-along an' hard to hit. But there's a plenty signposts, an' the first of 'em sez, 'Do as you'd be done by.' There's a man smarts under lifelong wrong of your working, an' I for one won't believe you mean better until you've axed his humble pardon."

"All's fair in love, isn't it? The race is to the strong. You, who live among wild creatures, ought to know that much."

"An' ban't God above nature, an' honesty to men above love of women?"

"Preach to posts! Nothing is above love of women, and nature's the only shape God takes in this world to my knowledge. I tell you that men like you, out of your simple hearts, have invented a God a thousand times kinder and better than the true God. There's no kindness in Him really, and no sympathy, and no ears, or speech or other senses. The true God is as much interested in you or me as a steam threshing-machine is interested in the wheat it winnows."

"Wicked nonsense you'm telling! Whatever good thing our hearts can think must come from God, for He made our hearts."

"Then why doesn't He keep them sweet?" asked Oldreive bitterly. "Why does He hand over the key of us to nature and let a servant do His own work? I tell you I wish I could be a better man. Who is going to help me? Why doesn't your God give me a hand? He can't. He's built me of my father's clay. I may be rotten, but d'you think I care? Not I! Life's only a matter of a few years; and

meantime I'm the cleverest man in these parts, and it will amuse me to show everybody that I am.”

“Well,” answered Mr Chugg thoughtfully; “upon the whole I won't have your manure, for I don't like your opinions—clever or foolish. You'll have no luck so long as you reckon God A'mighty's no better'n a steam threshing-machine. Nothing good will happen to seed or root while you plant for vanity. Us thought you was a changed character, but you'm building on the sand 'stead of the rock.”

He shook his head and passed on while Oldreive laughed and pursued his toil.

“Good manure would still feed grass though 'twas the devil's self spread it,” he shouted after the retreating figure.

And Chugg, as he journeyed up the hill from Cherry-brook Bridge to his home, met Sorrow Scobhull who had come across the fields from the farm and was proceeding by the same road. The stone-breaker now laboured in Oldreive's service, and, at this moment, he carried a letter from Hannah to her mother. He walked beside Merryweather and spoke with a sort of gloomy admiration of his master; for Scobhull was a pessimist and found some of Timothy's philosophy to his liking.

“He've shook me here an' there with his bitter tongue,” the labourer confessed. “There's such a lot to shake a man's faith in these stirring times, come to think of it—not to name that glassy devil winding through the midst of our lives down there. An' a starved river 'tis, for there's not a human being been throwed away in Dart for two years this month. So her'll take two when chance offers—mark me.”

Now Chugg had long regarded Dart as under his protection in more than a literal sense. He had lived within sight and sound of the river all his life; he had worked upon the banks for thirty years. He knew her with a knowledge quite different to Scobhull's; yet he, too, had been influenced unconsciously by her, as all men are who pursue their business beside her waters.

Chugg loved Dart and enjoyed an objective familiarity with it beyond that of any human creature. Her deeps and secrets ; her hovers and mossy weirs ; her otter holts, her salmon pools and spawning shallows, where the great fish wallowed in winter ; her tributaries and their distinctions ; her ways in storm and spate—all were familiar to him. The haunt of the snake and the bird, the records of the years, the writing of past floods set high in rack upon the alders, together with every other sign and wonder of the river, were the common experience of his labours. Lifelong intercourse had won from him admiration rather than any dread or fear. Dart's power, her fecundity, even her beauty were part of his discourse. She pointed many a moral in the water bailiff's mouth, and his impatience with Scobhull's paganism was natural. Now, already in some anger when he reflected upon Timothy Oldreive's recent sentiments, Chugg found his companion more than usually foolish and answered him impatiently.

"You'll drown your own self—that'll be the end of you. Worse than wicked 'tis, an' you'll end by passing through the water to Moloch, like they poor fools passed through the fire to un. I'm shamed of 'e—a man with all his intellects too, though they be only small ones."

"'Tis my intellects that do it," explained Scobhull. "I be a very thinking sort of man, 'an there's things I can't see no sense in—no more'n master do. He'm clever enough, whatever else he may be. Take the devil, as be a solid fact any way ; for who is there but don't feel the scratch of his claws ? Well, why for doan't the A'mighty God have a slap at him, instead of always being on at us poor human creatures to do it ? Us can't dare to say He couldn't, I suppose, if He was in a mood to ; an' I'm sure He very well might when you think of all the wiseacres He've got on His side to help Him. Moses an' Solomon an' last Lord Bishop of Exeter—gert enemies of the devil by all accounts ; not to name the shining angels, though I grant they

ban't built for hard work if church windows tell true. Why, God A'mighty could sweep ould Scrat out o' earth so easy as He swept un out of heaven, if He'd only put a half day's work to it.”

“’Tis a sort of reasoning no doubt,” admitted Mr Chugg unwillingly. “Though it calls for a minister to say whether you ban't damned yourself for giving advice to the Lord. Of course He could make us all good an' happy an' easy to-morrow by lifting His everlasting finger, but—well—I ban't going to demean myself to argue about it with you. An' if you'll take my advice you'll keep clear of Timothy Oldreive's scarlet ideas, else he'll make you a child of hell like himself.”

“Not he won't. I don't understand half he says or half he laughs at. Dart down there, teaches me all I know. Sometimes I dare not listen to her when I be alone, for she chills my blood; an' sometimes I can't listen unless I be alone. Such a plaguey many ways she hath with her.”

“An' all ways will lead you one way,” declared the other. He had now reached his cottage, and Jenny hastened to him, the bearer of sad news.

“Poor Mrs Trout, faither—gone at last. Her went between four an' five this morning, an' Trout waked just in time to hold her hand an' hear her say ‘good bye’ to un. He'm like a madman, they say.”

“Won't last,” replied the old man. “He'm not built to suffer more'n a little. ’Tis a merciful release for the woman, as hardly had half a pound o' lung left, I believe, but sad for all they childer.”

Then the water bailiff entered his house, and Scob-hull proceeded towards Two Bridges.

CHAPTER III

THE WIDOW-MAN

THE death of Mrs Trout furnished a theme for discourse over morning drinking at the "Ring o' Bells." Axworthy brought the news about noon, and related how Mary Merle and her mother were in the cottage, and how Mr Trout had roamed away with his grief to endure it alone.

As Scobhull entered the bar, Mrs Bradridge was delivering her opinion.

"Her was a good mother an' a better wife than that tub of a man deserved," she said. "Worn out, poor soul—good for no more than a old cucumber frame, as have raised a many young plants in its time but be scat to pieces at last."

"'Twas worrit killed her, I reckon, though Mark Trout said 'twas the sorrow of her eldest girl being turned off from kitchenmaid to Squire Batten. But everybody knows 'twas the wicked jealousy of the cook there, because Thirza Trout was a bowerly maid, an' the manservants found it out."

Axworthy offered this explanation, but Scobhull shook his head.

"As a man of common sense I say 'twas babies, if you ax me," he declared; "an' the last straw 'as broke the camel's back."

"You'm a liar!" cried a voice, and the widower himself appeared. "What do you know about women and babies, you broken pitchfork, as no female will take at a gift?" he said furiously. "'Twas a decline-ment her died of, as have been creeping upon the woman for years an' years. An' not all the physic in Plymouth could have saved her; so shut your fool's mouth. I be suffering enough without you."

Mr Trout's eyes were red and his voice was unsteady. He had in truth endured much, and was now in a bemused condition resulting from stimulant, from honest grief, and from the unconscious delight of having suddenly become a personage for the first time in his life. He asked for some spirits, and Betty served her old stableman.

"Us be very sorry for you, Mark," she said; "an' more sorry still for the little ones. Sarah was a good creature. God knows I wish we was all so ready to go."

"A righteous woman, as kept herself an' her family clean, an' didn't lose her temper once in a month," answered the husband. "In fact, the Lord had need of her; an' I've been to Princetown churchyard this minute to see the spot, an' a damn, bleak beast of a place it is to leave a loving woman in. An' I found butivul words 'pon a stone there, an' wrote 'em down so well as my shaking hands would do it. An' then I called on Mrs Truscott, the stonemason's widow, 'bout a monument, as would make me take something, dear good soul; though a chap as sleeps a husband an' wakes a widow-man, haven't got much stomach for mortal drink, God knows."

Axworthy looked at Mrs Bradridge, and dared to close one eye. Trout was occupied with a piece of paper he had taken from his pocket. At the same moment Merryweather Chugg appeared, and Teddy Merle arrived from Bray Farm with a message for the bereaved husband.

"This be very sad news, an' no man's sorrier for you than me, Mark Trout," said the water bailiff.

"Sorrow won't help me. All as be friends to me must do more'n be sorry," returned Trout. "What water I've shed have left me like a withered leaf, else I wouldn't be drinking now. An' these here words I've took off a tomb an' put my wife's name in for the other party's, an' I'll read it an' hear what you've got to say for it."

"Please, Mr Trout," interrupted Teddy, "mother wants you to your home. The childern be terrible

wisht without theer mother, an' there's nobody there they'll go to. An' Mary can't tell where to find a thing; an' your eldest darter's in a bad way, an' have got her apern rolled over her head an' be lying in a corner of the garden screaming, an'——"

"I'll come," said Mr Trout; "it's my duty. Tell Missis I'll come up the hill by-an'-by. 'Tis right I should. But first I'll read this here for the grave-stone; an' if there's to be any collection, neighbours, now the hand of God's so heavy against me, for a stone will every penny go. 'Twill be a whacker, as becomes such a woman."

"Can't b'lieve she'm gone," said Mr Chugg. "A very cheerful creature considering."

"Why for shouldn't her be?" asked Mark suspiciously. "I ban't one to rob the dead of credit, God knows; but I've never heard anything against her husband as I can remember."

Merryweather's lips tightened, but he felt it was no time for moralising, and so kept silence. Moreover, he perceived that Trout had drunk enough.

"Best read your paper an' go to your children," said Mrs Bradridge.

"One more cold," answered Mr Trout slowly and sadly, and Betty served him with more spirits.

Thereupon the man sat down in a corner and began to cry violently. The tears coursed over his round cheeks, and ran down into the corners of his mouth. He sniffed and spat.

"I've dranked my own tears to-day," he said, "an' salt as brine they be. If any here present thinks I be less a man for weeping, I only hope his turn will come. This is what I've set down for her; an' if there ban't none to help me with the stone, every penny I've got in the world will go to buy it, for have a momento the woman shall."

His tears still fell, and his fat hands shook as he rose and spread his paper on the counter of the bar. Everybody kept silence, and listened with sober interest.

"Beneath this stone lies all that was mortal of the most modest, chaste, pious, and in a word, most truly Christian woman, Sarah Trout, who having watched like one that waiteth for her Lord's coming, departed this life in the forty-third year of her age, mourned by a loving husband and children, who shall rise up and call her blessed. Dying she lives. Thy will be done."

Mr Trout folded up the paper and looked round him, while peace returned to his spirit.

"The end words be my own thought. An' it will cost seven pounds ten in marble, an' less in moor-stone. An' I mean it shall be polished like glass. An' what do 'e think of it, Chugg?"

"Very nice an' proper; but amazing you could give your mind to the matter so soon after."

"'Twas that or going mad, so I went from the burying-ground to Mrs Truscott direct, an' then to undertaker."

"I wish you'd go home now," said Teddy, "for your darter may scream herself into a fit if you don't."

"Not her—a bucket of cold water will put her right. For that matter 'tis well her should scream, an' the rest of 'em likewise. They'll never have nought worse to scream about, that's a certainty," answered Trout, preparing to depart. He snuffled and uttered windy sighs. Then he finished his spirit and water, blew his nose, shook hands with Mr Chugg for no particular reason, and went out.

"A very slight man," commented the water bailiff. "He thinks as he be in the full blast of sorrow, yet he can drown his grief wi' a glass an' easy tears."

"An' Widow Truscott upon his lips—did 'e mark that?" asked Betty Bradridge. "He often found reasons for going to see her in the old days. See if he don't offer to take her afore his youngest childern be tired of axin' for their mother."

Mr Chugg nodded.

"A man as can't do without a woman. An' them as puts 'Thy will be done' over their partners often be the first to remedy it. Bigger the tombstone, shorter the grief most times."

"An' us have got to pay for it seemingly," said Scobhull. "The man so good as started a collection for hisself!"

"I lay most of it would come back over this here bar," said Axworthy.

"No, you'm wrong there. He'm in earnest—eh, Vosper?"

The head man from Bray Farm had entered the inn a few moments sooner.

"Yes," he answered; "Trout means it—he'm like that. He'd waste money on a silly stone for his wife though his children might be shouting for hunger."

"A stone's all we can give the dead, however," said Scobhull, "though bread for the living do matter more."

"We stick stones up to soothe ourselves, not to please dust," answered Jacob Vosper bleakly. "There's a fashion of grief what explodes like a cannon an' bursts out into a monument as costs money; but the sorrow that be lessened by spending cash belongs to mean natures an' don't last longer'n tears take drying. The real thing be smouldering an' silent, as I very well know. Then only a man's heart cries—bloody tears that nobody sees—an' he fights against the work of time an' be jealous of forgetting his grief even in sleep. Where's Nicholas Edgecombe to? Have any man seed him to-day? I've got a message from his master if I should chance to meet with him."

None had seen the warrener, so Mr Vosper departed, and Teddy went with him. Mrs Bradridge sneered behind the stern man's back. There was no love lost between them and many whispered that, meeting her alone after her daughter's marriage with Oldreive, Mr Vosper had uttered plain truths and criticised Betty's reprobate conduct in a manner very severe. But the secret of that indictment was locked in the woman's heart.

"A wonnerful man as be too good an' great to mingle with us common folks," she said. "Can't think what 'tis 'bout water as makes them who drink it so puffed

up. You'd think 'twas all wind, seeing the way they lift their chins an' their eyes—as if they'd fly away an' go to heaven if they didn't wear heavy boots."

"I judge no man," declared Mr Chugg. "But malt an' hops be the invention of the Lord, so I won't hear a word against 'em. Vosper ban't fond of company. But I wouldn't say no word against him, any more than he would say a word against me."

"I'm sure nobody can," declared Scobhull.

"Awnly myself an' my wife can," said Chugg frankly; "an' 'tis the way of a wise man to keep his faults in his family."

Meantime young Merle and Mr Vosper ascended the hill towards Bray Farm. They were tramping in silence together when Teddy saw a figure on the moor.

"There's Edgecombe!" he said.

"So 'tis! Then perhaps, as your legs are younger'n mine, you'll be so kind as to run over with a message. Tell the man, Farmer Snow's nephew be coming down to-morrow an' will be ripe for a day's shooting next day. So he'm to make ready."

Teddy had not told Mr Vosper of his trouble with Nicholas and did not intend to do so. He started, as though to obey, but secretly designed to avoid the warrener. It happened, however, when skulking by the river until his hero should pass, that Edgecombe saw the boy and instantly approached him.

Teddy's heart beat fiercely. He bent over the water and pretended to be watching a trout. Then Smiler leapt to his side and thrust the nose of friendship into his hand, and Nicholas came up and spoke as he did so.

"I've wanted to see you, boy, because last time we met I used you wrong. You comed in a bad moment an' I swore at 'e. I hope you won't keep out of my way no more, for I'm sorry."

"You cussed me—an' I've always stuck up for you."

"I'm sorry for it, Ted."

"An' I'd have done anything on earth for 'e, an' gone an' killed that man for 'e even, if you'd axed me. I don't suppose you care nothing for me now."

"I like you very well, an' you'm a very good boy, an' I owe you a lot, same as I do all your folks. Come up Monday an' us'll have a day. The snipes be in the bogs 'pon Bair Down, an' you shall shoot some wi' my gun."

"You can't o' Monday. Mr Snow's nephew be come."

Then Teddy gave his message, arranged for another meeting, shook the hand that Edgecombe offered him and set off in great contentment to his home.

His increase of happiness was very apparent, and when Mary returned from the sorrowful and motherless, she asked in some astonishment why this death day of a poor neighbour should find her brother in such buoyant spirits. Then he explained the reason of his pleasure, and his sister shared it with him.

CHAPTER IV

THE LITTLE CHILDREN

ONCE or twice, towards the end of the year, Nicholas Edgecombe so far gave others and himself pleasure as to visit at Bray Farm upon Sundays and eat his dinner there. He liked Mrs Merle and she was fond of him, because her son set the warrener so high. She consulted Nicholas as to Teddy's future, for although Mr Vosper was both older and wiser than the boy's friend, he lacked patience with young people, and that defect marred his judgment when the theme was youth. Mr Vosper, with all his great virtues and sound sense, was not a sportsman, and he gloried in the fact. He held that men who lived first for destruction of animals might hardly be said to justify their own existence; and to endure that one might hunt foxes, he considered a career unworthy of any intelligent being. These sentiments upon Dartmoor made enemies for Jacob Vosper; and when he ventured to assert that life itself has at least as many obligations as wealth, people told him to mind his own business and leave preaching to parsons.

A formal invitation came to Nicholas in late December, and Mary brought it. She met him at Two Bridges and told him how her mother hoped that he would spend Christmas Day at Bray Farm.

"Never heard of a chap with so many friends as me," he answered, grinning in the old way; "such goodness I wonder at, I'm sure. There's my master have axed me to go to Cross Ways already; an' Chugg, he wants me to eat my dinner along with him. 'Tis wonnerful!"

Mary's eyes clouded.

"Oh, dear ; don't 'e say I'm too late. Mother will be vexed ; an' so will Teddy ; an' so will Mr Vosper."

"Lucky I didn't answer 'yes' to either of 'em, for I was down-daunted when they axed me. But I'll come to Bray Farm, 'cause I'd sooner go there than anywheres else. An' I'll bring a few golden plovers along with me if I get any luck that way."

"Mother will be glad, an' I should tell you that Mr Vosper thought to have all them little Trouts, for 'tis scant pleasure falls to the lot of them. Would 'e mind?"

"A very good notion," said Nicholas. "Us'll make the little things gay for once. I've a great pile of pictures to home. I tore 'em down long ago. Well, there they be, an' the childer shall have 'em."

"I'm sorry you took 'em down after all your pains."

"Couldn't abide the stare of 'em all to myself. There was the Prince o' Wales in soldier red ; an' the Duke of Edinburgh in blue ; an' their sons an' darters ; an' Lord Beaconsfield ; an' many such like great people. An' they did keep their eyes on me so coorious that I felt ashamed to take my meat an' drink afore such fine company. But they'm all rolled up, an' the little uns shall have 'em."

"I—I should like one or two, Nick."

"Take your choice, my dear," he said carelessly, and then they parted—Mary feeling sudden happiness at her heart not unmixed with sorrow. She was very glad that he would come to them at Christmas ; she was vexed that he could thus call her "my dear," as now he often did. It brought him as near as a brother, and put him as far off as a brother. Sometimes he praised her and she rejoiced ; sometimes he asked her to make netting for him or mend a hole in his coat, and she gloried in such labours. But no pressure of hand, no flash of eye rewarded them. His return was always the same hearty and grateful thanks ; and she would have felt closer to him if he had taken her services as a matter of course. She loved him faithfully, because she could not help it ; she fought against any

sort of hope and blamed herself for the joy she felt at doing Edgecombe's will. Yet always she felt that his mind's attitude was irrevocable and that a gulf was for ever thrown between his heart and hers. Despite the hidden fret and fever she continued uneasily happy. She was something to him—so at least she believed at that season. Then slowly the passion worked to torment, and became visible to other eyes. Her expression spoke of it, though she was dumb. Presently only one member of her little world went on his way ignorant and unmoved; and that was Nicholas himself. Hannah had swallowed up all his passion, and the man's nature was such that Time could never furnish him with another heart or renew his first fiery love of woman. His sensibilities in that sort were blunted; even his sympathies were dwarfed and scorched by past tribulation. He took less pleasure in his kind than of old. Only with the folk of Bray Farm did he laugh again and approach his former manners.

Christmas came, and with it the banquet on the hill—a festivity which not less than twenty persons enjoyed. At the head of the table sat the widow herself, and on her right hand was Teddy, and on her left her daughter. Then followed eight little Trouts—four upon each side; but the eldest boy and girl were in service, and could not come. Three boys and five girls, ranging from three to twelve years old, waited, round-eyed, for a meal long dreamed about; and then sat Mr Trout, with his baby on his lap. The children and their parent were all in black; but the baby wore red flannel, and made a bright spot of colour in the mourning gloom. From hushed silence, the infants waxed bold, even to laughter, as two fat geese and a sirloin of beef appeared in the full splendour of those historic dishes.

Mr Vosper took the bottom of the table, with Nicholas Edgecombe and the man Axworthy upon his right and left; then came two of the Bray Farm labourers and their wives. There waited upon this com-

pany two maidens and Axworthy's younger brother. Mrs Merle and Mary had cooked the dinner, and they were hot and breathless in consequence, because time had been short for changing of gowns. But complete success crowned that abundant meal, and the elders were happy to see each child laugh and grow rosy. The small things gorged themselves like puppies, and, afterwards, in charge of the eldest girl, marched off to an empty barn, each cuddling a pale orange and a piece of chocolate in silver foil. Then the party lingered over dried fruits, and sipped elderberry wine and sloe gin. The men lighted their pipes. Mark Trout, worthy soul, had long been manifesting a secret anxiety and impatience; and now he spoke and addressed his mistress.

"You mustn't hold it uncivil, ma'am, for God knows how deep I be in debt to you and Mr Vosper for all your gracious goodness to me an' my poor lambs—very different to that damn grey hen in the valley, as would charge the swallows for house-room under her eaves, if she could. But I promised a lady to Princetown as I'd drop in afore dark—her being a very lonesome woman. So, if you'll mind Albert Victor, Miss, you'll be doing more than one person a kind turn."

Albert Victor was handed into Mary's arms, and Mark Trout, calling upon heaven to bless the company, withdrew.

A labourer laughed.

"Doan't ax for no prophet to say where he be going," said Teddy.

"To Widow Truscott's. Shall us send a bottle of wine to her or not?" asked Mrs Merle.

"No," answered Mr Vosper firmly. "She'm a very snug woman, an' can well afford her own drink, as that man knows. He's after her, an' I hear tell to Princetown that she's minded to take him, children an' all. To think a grown woman can commit such foolishness!"

"Her's very fond of childern, an' never had none of her own," declared a labourer's wife; "though what there be about Trout to hold a female eye, who knows?"

None could give a satisfactory answer.

"I've bought a pound of raisins," said Nicholas, "for I mind when I was young us thought a lot of snap-dragon. You pluck the raisins out of burning brandy in the dark. Can 'e spare a wine-glass of spirits, ma'am?"

"I don't much like the thought of liquor coming on their little tongues," said Mr Vosper.

But Mary pleaded for the frolic.

"They'll burn their fingers, and 'twill set 'em against it," suggested Axworthy.

"Better their fingers than their immortal souls," admitted the elder. "Then us'll put on the ash faggot," he added, "an' see the bands burst off it, like our faithers afore us."

"An' drink wassail, I hope," hinted Axworthy.

"'Tis brewing," said Mrs Merle.

"As for that, my mother was best maker of it ever I met," declared Edgecombe.

"Apples, an' sugar, an' spice, an' old ale went to it—pretty drinking, no doubt," murmured Axworthy.

"We ought to wassail the Lord Jesus Christ and none else this day," said Mr Vosper stoutly; "and if Chugg was here he would say the same; an' if Edgecombe here understood, he'd say the same."

"Drink the health of Him, you mean?"

"An' could it be done respectful without harm?" asked Axworthy. "I thought health-drinking was a mere civil contrivance between man an' man."

"It can be done," said Mr Vosper; "an' when I was a groom to the Fortescues in my early youth, it was done. Us drinked, an' my young master used to sing a fine old carol when us did it. He wrote the words out for me, me being very serious-minded even then. An' though 'tis a brave few years ago, I can call home the rhyme an' the tune to this day."

"Sing it, Jacob," said Mrs Merle. "You did used to sing to your work afore master died."

"But never since," he reminded her. "Because it wouldn't become me now to sing like a light-hearted

bird. There's no dignity to it. But this being the Saviour's Birthday, I'll lift up my voice if you ax me to. There should be a flourish of moosic first, for my old master's son—him as be a famous chap in London now--would sing to the piano-forte while his sister played. Anyhow, here goes I."

He struck into an ancient carol or star-song ; began weakly, but gained in strength and precision as he proceeded.

"Tell us, thou clear an' heavenly Tongue,
Where be the Babe but lately sprung ?
Lies He the lily-banks among ?

Or say, if this new Birth of ours
Sleeps, laid wi'in some Ark o' Flowers,
Spangled with dew-light ; thou canst clear
All doubts, an' manifest the where.

Declare to us, bright Star, if we shall seek
Him in the Morning's blushing cheek,
Or search the beds of Spices through,
To find Him out ?

No, this ye need not do ;
But only come, an' see Him rest
A Princely Babe in's Mother's Breast.

Come then, come then, an' let us bring
Unto our prettie Twelfth-Tide King
Each one his several offering.

An' when night comes, we'll give Him wassailing ;
An' that His treble Honours may be seen,
We'll choose Him King, an' make His Mother Queen."

Mr Vosper stopped, and Mary praised him. A little sigh rose from her lap, and, looking down, she saw that the head man had sung Albert Victor to sleep.

"A butivul rhyme," said Mrs Merle "'Tis the children's festival, sure enough. To think the Lord o' life was a li'l, soft, sweet, blue-eyed bud once, as cried baby tears, an' slept His baby sleep, an' sucked an' patted His mother's round bosom wi' his li'l hands—they same hands as was nailed through an' through, an' be stretching out to save the sinful world ever since."

"Well spoke, ma'am," answered Mr Vosper.

Axworthy yawned and departed to join his brother and the maidens in the kitchen; Teddy and Mr Vosper went to play with the children; the women began to clear the table; Mary, placing the baby in a position of safety on the sofa, went to fetch a great dish for the snap-dragon.

"We must have dipping for apples, too," she told Nicholas. "You set the apples floating in a pan of water, an' the childer has to fetch 'em out with their teeth. 'Twill make you die o' laughing to watch 'em."

The light waned quickly, and the children were called in from the barn. Eight small faces presently shone blue in the glare of the flickering spirit flames. Edgecombe plucked a plum for a three-year-old girl, and another babe, having no knowledge of fire, thrust his own fat fist boldly in and kept it there. Immediately he roared, was rescued and borne away to be comforted with oil. The others, profiting by this accident to their pioneer, exercised caution, and quickly darted little fingers in and out for the treasure under the flames. Once Nicholas stretched his hand behind Mary in the dark room. She felt his arm behind her waist, and her senses swam, and her face glowed with a deep rose, but the Jack o' lantern light in the dish killed it. Yet no great arm cuddled her; no pressure drew her to him under the darkness. He was only giving a raisin to a child beyond her. She thanked God that none could see, and presently crept away to her own room.

When she returned the lights were shining and the children romping with their elders. Not until eight o'clock did Mr Trout come back for his family; and he found them still playing and eating, save the baby and the burnt infant, who both slept.

"I've lighted the fire as I passed home," he said to his daughter, "so theer'll be water boiling time us gets back."

Comforters of wool were tied round hot necks; small, patched coats were dragged on to small bodies; the little girls were kissed; Mr Trout organised the retirement.

"You take hold of Tom an' Rupert, will e' Jane? An' you walk along with Minnie; an' you with Ethel; an' all keep close to me, for 'tis so black as a wolf's mouth. Now, Miss Mary, where's the baby to?"

Albert Victor was wrapped in an old shawl of his mother's and placed in his father's arms. All observed that Mark Trout, despite his many cares, appeared to be in a cheerful and almost jubilant frame of mind.

Axworthy nudged Edgecombe and put a question.

"How be Mrs Truscott, then?"

"So well as ever I seed her," returned the little man. "An'—well, ban't time now, but you might hear a bit of news, dear souls, come presently. An' a happy New Year to all of us; an'—come on, Jane: keep your eye to the white handkerchief round my neck an' catch tight hold of the childern going over the bridge."

Little chattering voices died away into the darkness and the men, feeling that they had done their duty, settled to peace and tobacco, while the women prepared supper.

"He've hooked Mother Truscott," said Axworthy; "I seed it in the triumphant look of un an' the sweat rolling off his fat chops."

"Both up fifty years old too," said Mrs Merle. "What do she gain but all the troubles of mothering another woman's children?"

"She may like it," said an old labourer; "you never can tell what'll move a widow."

Then the entertainment drew to its conclusion, and presently, lantern in hand, Nicholas Edgecombe tramped through great darkness homewards. There was peace in his heart upon this night, and long afterwards he looked back to that Christmas Day as a bright spot shining out of gloom.

CHAPTER V

BELLAFORD TOR

ON a day in early spring, the world from Bellaford Tor was draped in the east wind's mantle. Milky hazes wrapped the horizon and washed the moor with pale light, through which Dart glimmered like a metal thread and wound amid her marshes, her hills and naked woodlands. Larks shrilled in the pale sunlight and plovers called. The wind sang drily in the dead rushes on the hill-top, and above, great separate clouds were scattered in a long procession from east to west. At the zenith only they revealed their true proportions, but rising and receding they huddled into pearly masses and vanished behind the haze. Higher yet, on a plane above the cumuli, long white streaks of freezing vapour stretched southward and obeyed another current of air. Their true motions were so slow as to be invisible to any but a patient watcher. Little colour touched this great scene. The sky was pale and winter had doffed no part of her raiment, for beneath northern-facing walls and in sunless hollows her sere robe revealed ermine fringes of snow. Contrasted with this virgin whiteness, the dead sedges and grasses seemed almost warm in tone. The horizons were all vague and grey; only beneath the sun, now at meridian, earth and sky melted together in liquid vapours of pale, misty gold.

Fire sent forth great clouds of smoke upon the waste, and running ripples of flame crept along before the wind. Behind them extended a gloomy mantle of ash and char; before them streamed their banners of smoke. These spring fires, or "swaleings," had been deliberately lighted that furze and heather might perish, and the grasses, thus relieved, prosper for flocks and herds.

Here now moved two figures, and chance ordered their going so that they stood close together before they saw each other. A curtain of flame and smoke separated them; it blew away, and Edgcombe found Timothy Oldreive's wife within twenty yards of him. He was returning from a visit to Bellaford Farm upon his master's business; while her errand at the Tor she presently told him.

Nicholas had not seen Hannah since the day when she departed to Exeter, and now he had little mind to address her. Smarting with the smoke in his eyes, throbbing at heart before this abrupt encounter, he turned away and increased his speed. But she was of a different mind. For months she had desired to speak with him, and here, upon this lonely hillside above her home, offered an opportunity that might not again occur.

She called to him and he stopped, turned, and slowly approached.

"Nicholas Edgcombe! I want 'e! I want to speak to 'e. You won't deny a woman a word—even me—will 'e?"

So he came to her nervously, and she, more self-contained, waited and watched him with her hands folded up in her apron, and her sun-bonnet fluttering in the wind.

"I be here, Hannah Oldreive," he said, and looked very steadfastly upon her.

She did not reply immediately, and then answered without apparent purpose.

"When my man's away, I walk up here sometimes for a breath of air an' to fill my eyes an' thoughts wi' bigger things than the farm. Will 'e sit beside me in this here lew spot out o' the wind for a little, or be you too busy to-day?"

"Yes, I'll bide."

They sat upon the western side of a great boulder; they took their stations within a yard of each other, and stared silently down at the creeping, crackling fire below.

"May I call 'e 'Nicholas,' or would you rather I said 'Mr Edgcombe?'" she asked, very calmly.

Then the man's self-control returned, and he spoke of the past.

"'Tis what I must call you be the thought in my mind," he said. "I'd never have sought your face no more; but it was to happen. Here be you, an' here be I. An' how do us stand? You called me to you. Why for? What should us tell about? There's nought in common but old courting—as ended in bitter grief an' pain for me. How could you treat a man like you treated me? How could you live a lie for a year, an' eat your bread, an' take your rest, knowing the thing you was going to do?"

She stared at him.

"Has your life stuck still, then, that you can mind all that? It happened a thousand years ago—so I thought."

"It happened seven months ago—yesterday, you might say."

"You needn't think I haven't smarted too, though time has gone so quick with me. The Lord was on your side. Hell don't wait for a bad woman to die. I'm punished proper enough—body an' soul both, if it pleases you to know it."

"Don't talk that way," he answered. "According to what be good in us, so we suffer when we do evil. To say you've felt bad since, be only to say you was good afore. I'll speak no ill against you, Hannah; an' I never have more than this: that you was wicked to leave me without telling me. I'll grant a cleverer man than me took you; I'll grant you had a right to go; but I'll never grant you had any right to go without axing me first, for there was solemn tokening between us. An' all your love for him didn't ought to have turned your love for me into such bitter hate that you could go like you did an' leave me to find out."

"I never hated you."

"Worse—else you couldn't have done it if an angel had axed you; you couldn't have let me live so cheerful, an' thank God night an' morning for what you never meant me to have. You couldn't have let me

sweat an' moil for 'e, an' make the best nest I could for 'e, an' fill my heart an' soul, an' senses with 'e. I ban't angered that you could change your mind ; but to do what you done——"

"He made me do it. It was a condition. He mazed me, overlooked me, put the evil eye upon me, so that I weren't no more mistress of myself. An' I didn't lie to you for a year : 'twas all done—first an' last—inside two months. Before God I swear that I was bewitched and kindiddled and hoodwinked into it. Then, once he'd got me, he gave over his lies, his soft speeches, an' cunning promises, an' showed me the real man. Then I knowed what I'd done. I don't sit here to excuse myself. I don't ax you to pity. I don't even ax the Lord to pity. Only—only—don't think 'tis well with me ; don't believe 'em when they tell you I'm a happy woman. Your misery's joy beside of mine. You've escaped—by a cruel road, I know. Still, you've escaped, an' you're free to find a good woman as'll make you forget a bad one. But me—what is there for me?"

"You must follow your star, like all of us."

"It has set," she answered calmly. "My sky's all dark ; there's nought before me but long, lone living beside a man I despise an' who despises me. Not a thought in common but the thought of a bad deed. Not a hope or fear, not a hate or love in common have us got. He've—there, what's the good of telling about that? Best we leave that part. Timothy and me know each other : that's our punishment."

"I be very sorry you'm unhappy. The saying is that you be blithe an' peart."

"Yes ; an' 'twill always be so while I can keep the truth out of my eyes. Not my own mother—as drove me into it—guesses how things are. But I wanted you to know. I'd made up my mind you should. It did ought to be balm to 'e, I'm sure."

Edgcombe shook his head.

"You never thought that," he answered. "Whatever you felt to me you know right well what I felt to you."

"I did love you," she said ; "an' never better than

the day I left you, an' never better than the day I married him, an' never better than now. I can't tell how it came about. A man's stronger'n a woman. My love for him was a thing spun of magic an' moonshine—the devil knows how. I was cast away, an' no God never helped me, an' you didn't guess the fight I was fighting. How should you? Else you'd have saved me. But all the words in the world won't throw no light on that darkness. I did an awful wicked thing, an' the punishment begun afore even I'd done it. I ban't sorry for myself, mind; an' I don't want you to be sorry for me neither, or waste a thought on a heartless woman not worth a prayer or a curse. Only I'm glad you know that what I make 'em think ban't the truth. 'Tis a weak an' cowardly thing to tell you, but a creature like me would run mad if I thought there wasn't one human soul in the huge world as understood me. So I've said it. Now you'd best to go."

"Not yet. I wouldn't have seeked you, Hannah, but since you've said this——. An' yet—what's the use of talkin'?"

"None to you, but it's done me some good, I reckon, for now you'll know how I be punished. Not that anything as I be strong enough to suffer would be great enough for what I've done. An'—an' how is it with you, Nicholas, that you can think 'twas only yesterday? Yet maybe you'd rather not tell me."

"There's nothing to tell. Life has suddenly turned into a sober business, that's all. Afore I met you 'twas sleep without dreaming—no more to it than a sheep's life. Then you come, but you was only a fine dream. An' then you went away again, an' I woke up."

"I've ruined your life?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose you or anybody could do that, unless I helped. You've changed my life. Two hundred more rabbits off the warren this year than ever comed off before. But you—I could wish you'd find the road back to happiness some way. You was meant to be a happy woman."

She gazed at him, and the sleepy look came into her

beautiful eyes. She stretched her hand a little way towards him, but he made no motion, and she drew it back.

"At least you can forgive me, Nicholas?"

"Long ago."

"An' don't bear no malice towards me?"

"None—not now."

"Too busy to think about it, I expect."

"I think of 'e often enough."

"An' I of you. 'Tis a cruel thing the way God A'mighty punishes our mistakes, instead of showing them to us an' giving us another chance. See what's become of my life—just 'cause I was a brainless fool an' listened to a liar. God haven't much patience with thick-headed people, seemingly. They always come to grief, no matter how well-meaning they be. The devil couldn't have ruined Adam and Eve if He hadn't let un go into the garden, and creep to the ear of that poor growed-up baby! What would you an' me say to a father as suffered his little ones to play with an adder?"

"You'm turned bitter, I see. I was that way too—after; an' often now I fall into a blackness when the night comes. But there's plenty of work to be done whether we'm happy or whether we'm wretched. Hard work be good for bitterness of mind."

She laughed.

"Work! My life be work. Working an' waking's one, with just enough sleep an' food to let me keep working. You've heard tell the farm's looking better. Who's to be thanked, do 'e reckon? Look at my hands. Feel 'em—no call to fear. They ban't the soft, creamy hands you used to cuddle. I work on the land when there's none to see; I go out afore dawn with Scobhull, an' feel the morning wind blowing out of the grey and freezing the heart-roots of me. . . . I'm larning to plough unbeknownst to Timothy."

The old worship was waking in the man. He sighed and struck his gaiters with his stick.

"I must go," he said. "The fire will be here in a minute."

"More fashions of fire than one," she said. "At least you'll let me hear you speak the word I've prayed to hear ever since I sinned against you."

"What be that?"

"That you have forgiven me."

"I've told 'e so."

"Say it then."

"I forgive 'e from the bottom of my heart, Hannah."

She bowed her head into her hands as he spoke her name, and during the silence that followed, her tears fell slowly through her fingers upon the earth. He saw them glitter down.

"Don't cry, woman; don't cry," he said.

"There's comfort in it—'tis all the miserable have got—to me 'tis what smoke be to him. When us fights an' each tries our wickedest to stab t'other with words, he falls back on his pipe an' I get out of his sight an' cry. If tears could only——"

The fire climbed the moor like a red stream. It sounded as the crisp ripple of water, and, heard at hand, its various utterances were explained by the nature of its fuel. Through dead rush and sedge and livid bents the vanguard of it rolled and leapt with a dry chuckle that licked up every light thing instantly; but from the rear, where stood up ling and furze and solid stumps ablaze, there came a deeper voice: the roll and pant of full-fed flames. A jagged, burning fringe curled round about each knap and knoll and blackened cairn. Behind all spread desolation, and under the smoke the scarlet teeth of this monster browsed over the heath and stopped to gnaw and growl when stouter branch or furze clump stayed the way. The burning line sometimes smouldered into tinder, sometimes flickered out at one point, to revive magically a yard ahead. Its lambent tongues tumbled like a wave and threw up sparks and streamers of crooked flame that rose and vanished in the smoke. Similar heath-fires, widely scattered, burnt upon remote hills. Raptorial birds understood the phenomena; hawks hovered overhead, and carrion crows sought under the smoke for those

small creeping things that the fire sent running for their lives.

Suddenly Edgecombe rose to his feet.

"Best go up-long if you'm going," he said, "an' keep to windward of all this smother an' smoulder as you walk home, else you'll burn your shoes."

"I shan't go no further to-day," she answered. "I've had what's better than the top of Bellaver; I've heard you say you forgive me. Good-bye, Nicholas."

She leapt up and was gone before he could reply.

"Good-bye!" he called after her as she sped hastily away.

Then the smoke blew up between them and he stood in thought, motionless, while the burning heather crackled and the fire's fierce voices rose almost at his feet.

Out of the ruin of this man's own old faith; from that beautiful belief founded upon no rock of trial, untested and unproved, there was springing up for Nicholas a new thing. It lacked the child-like loveliness and wide simplicity of his early ideas; yet a maturer dignity promised presently to distinguish it. He never meditated upon the matter; nevertheless he knew that there was arising within him another light, even as the morning often discovered his labours. Dawn, flushing the dewy hills, not seldom found him there; not seldom the first shivering light of winter days illumined his countenance in some lofty region and touched man and granite simultaneously. So now a spirit quickened out of his darkness and guessed at but yet unknown, a new dawn was glimmering over the heart of this arcadian man.

His meeting with Hannah Oldreive shook him out of the calm that slowly returned upon his life. He had pictured their encounter often; he had wondered as to what would happen and what might be said. Now it had come and gone and brought nothing strange with it. The tale that Hannah told was only such as naturally might follow what he had seen in the moth-time, when he looked through the window of the farm

by night and heard an unhappy man and woman proclaim their misery ; yet upon this meeting with her, the past became the present again, and Edgecombe's spirit was plunged into great gloom. But Hannah Oldreive grew something happier as she returned home in the peace of his forgiveness.

CHAPTER VI

“PIXIES’ HOLT”

TWICE after his conversation with Oldreive’s wife did Nicholas again meet her alone before the summer. On neither occasion had he sought her, but she was not innocent of a desire to renew friendship with the warrener as time passed by. For her husband, his early attempts at better living once behind him, he returned to his accustomed ways and no man could perceive in him any further effort to do rightly or justify his existence.

Timothy Oldreive had never met with Nicholas, rather from accident than intent; but he knew that his wife had done so, for she told him that her old lover had forgiven her. Upon hearing this fact the farmer showed little emotion; he merely sneered that Hannah should find comfort in the circumstance. His own ill-will towards Edgcombe, if it slumbered, could never perish, for Oldreive had done the man too great an injury to forgive him or desire his forgiveness. He was pleased to believe that the warrener hated him with abiding fury and might at any moment attempt to revenge himself when the opportunity offered.

Not until mid-June did the men actually meet; then appearances gave colour to Timothy’s opinion and chance ordered a violent, vital difference that shaped the fortunes of four lives.

The matter fell out thus.

Returning unexpectedly from trout fishing upon the lonely, upper reaches of Cherrybrook, Oldreive met Sorrow Scobhull walking over the Moor. Surprised to see him thus so far from work before the day was done, Timothy stopped his man and learned that he was

carrying a letter from Mrs Oldreive to Nicholas Edgecombe. The master’s first thought was to take this missive on the spot, but he changed his mind, nodded, as though Scobhull’s information was familiar, and went his way.

Suspicion wakened, each human whisper that touched his ear, each human eye that met his own brought food for it. Here was a mighty new interest in life and one not without its sporting aspect. His reason told him that he was a fool; yet he clutched at the idea; and sometimes he almost found himself desiring to believe in it. He conceived of a secret understanding between his wife and Edgecombe; he built up whole mountains of imagined wrong; he was even gratified at this grievance, for such a circumstance must put him right with himself and the world. It would be a pleasing experience to feel for once that mankind was upon his side, that his fellow-creatures must condone or even applaud any violence that he might commit. His attitude towards Hannah was already such that he did not stop to consider her in this connection. There was no sympathy and no understanding between them, for their intercourse was built upon mutual contempt. He pictured his honour being sent down the wind by her; yet he regarded such a tragedy less as the ruin of his future life than as the reason for his future conduct. Like others before him, he tried to imagine his own emotions under this ordeal; and he came to a very wrong belief and opinion concerning them; for at present he regarded the possibility with indifference. But a man, though he may show himself little enough jealous for his honour, will nevertheless wake into very real indignation if others tamper with it.

For the present Timothy kept his counsel, said nothing about his knowledge to Hannah and enquired nothing concerning her letter to the warrener. Then, three days after he had met his servant upon the way to Edgecombe’s cottage, Oldreive again chanced upon Scobhull far afield. But his absence from the farm was on this occasion easily understood. The day

happened to be a public holiday and, when such occurred, Sorrow Scobhull always occupied his leisure in one fashion. Now at noon he sat by the river in a deep valley below Dartmeet.

Shelves of granite, cracked and riven, here sloped to the stream, and their interstices were filled with little fallow saplings and flowering plants. Immediately beneath lay a salmon pool and beyond it ascended steep banks much torn and rent by floods. Uncovered roots climbed and twisted like silver snakes within this chaos of shattered stone, naked earth, lush grass and fern. The bilberry, attaining to a great size here, prospered in the shade; alder, buckthorn and bracken grew together; the great burnet lifted her blood-red flowers and the little loosestrife scattered each dewy glade with gold. The crowns of the boulders were grey and apple-green, splashed with ebony lichens and mellowed with mosses and hepatic plants that grew darker of colour towards the rock-bases and became almost black where the river lapped them. Above the banks, tier upon tier, rose oak and ash, birch and larch in ascending planes that shone beneath the vertical glory of the sun. But their underwoods knew not of this noon splendour. Only dawn and red sunset searched their secrets and found a horizontal pathway to their dim hearts. Now was the hour of the forest crowns, and they basked in the blaze. The birch shone in a trembling and lucent veil of tiny leaves, and through its robe ran tracery of bough and branch deep set in the web of shining green; but the oaks collected their light in dense sheaves and galaxies that glowed massively against the delicate, bright hazes of the finer foliage.

In this tremendous and unclouded sunshine the granite reflected a pure radiance, and its shelves and steps, down-sloping to the river, were only less brilliantly lighted than the actual water-foam. Here, mingling their colours beneath the water, all vivid, lustrous shades of ruddy agate and amber and rosy pink twinkled up from the pebbles under the river;

and over them her currents dashed in a thousand spouts and wavelets along their murmuring way. Her foam was blue in shadow; in sunshine, a pure, pale green; and beneath the arch of each little fall, up and down, up and down, the imprisoned air rose and fell in a column, white through the crystal. All her fret and thunder presently subsided and spread into great stillness, as the last golden bubble burst, or danced a moment in the harbour of some inlet before returning its proper atom to Dart. And there heaven and summer cloud met the river. They were not clearly reflected, but caught and woven lovingly into the web of the water; twined into the dimpled play and swirl of it; spread out upon the smoothness; barred and broken with umber reflections from the banks; so blended into their transparent mirror’s self, that each tremor and ripple of the pool caught their deep blue or answered their aerial silver.

The lonely gorge was soaked in light, and its concourse of huge rock-faces and abrupt boulders made a new harmony where Dart flashed over stickles and waterfalls, or rested in placid backwaters, or dived by hidden channels beneath the over-lapping rocks. Everywhere bright sunstars in the river flashed upon the shore, to wake riparian shadows with sudden fire and touch each grain of quartz in the granite to a shining gem. This fitful sparkle danced and glittered upwards from the salmon pool; it played upon the trees and the earth; and it lighted the dark eyes of Sorrow Scobhull, where he sat above the river with his face bent down upon it.

Into the heart of the water he gazed, and his mind conjured the dancing foam into a wreath for a grave, or read its bubbles into a dead man’s name. For here, at this spot of present peace and glory, where Dart, flowing and throbbing like an artery, brought life to a good green world; here, under the shriek and fury of winter storm, this man’s father had met the river in an evil hour and died. Battered, strangled, bruised

to jelly by the teeth of the stones, he was found when the waters sank; and the memory of him evermore held first place in his son's heart, so that this spot came to be a shrine whither Scobhull made many pilgrimages. Of its beauty he knew nothing; of its alternations from rage to peace he had never thought; this majestic mingling of rock and hill, river and hanging woodland offered no spectacle to his admiration. He only saw an enemy dragging her treacherous coils through this deep valley; and the death-pool of his father uttered haunting messages to him, and brought cloudy omens that darkened his spirit with familiar gloom as he sat and watched beside it.

So still he remained that the ants and tiny scarlet spiders hurried without fear over him and moved upon his clothes and hands. A water-ousel bobbed upon a stone within ten yards; a pigeon cooed from the wood; a fern-web beetle alighted upon his knee in garb of rich red and green. The creature tucked its little wings away under their shards, and crept about, and marvelled as to what manner of substance was the broadcloth that he roamed upon.

Suddenly a voice aroused this melancholy figure, and looking up Scobhull saw his master. Oldreive carried a salmon rod and was working down stream towards the Eagle Rock, where it towered grey amidst the trees. He angled here and there in those reaches where he knew that a fish might be lying.

"Hullo, Scob!—you make lively holiday by the look of it."

"I doan't want no holidays. I be here to think about things."

"What's the good of that?"

"In thicky pool my faither was drownded. An' I know every hole an' corner of Dart where a life have been lost—man, woman an' child."

"Well, what then? A good death enough. I'd as soon go that way as another."

"Maybe 'tis easy; maybe not. You know them

lines—so old as Bible, I expect: ‘Dart, Dart, wants a heart!’ So it is; an’ her haven’t tasted flesh for two year. She’m waitin’ for two lives now; an’ two she’ll have.”

“Don’t be such a fool.”

“Ah; I walked down the valley with Nick Edgecombe half an hour ago; an’ I told him same as I tell you; an’ he said same as you; an’ I said, ‘Tis you be the fool, not me,’ I said. ‘God’s light!’ I said, ‘ban’t there the whole history of this here water to cry out the truth of what I know?’”

“Where was Edgecombe off to?”

“He’d got to meet missis, he told me. I left unafore I comed down the hill to Dartmeet.”

“Whose missis?”

“Your’n. He told me an’ Axworthy, who comed out along with us on his way to Ashburton revel.”

Timothy showed indifference.

“Lucky you reminded me, for I promised to meet them. A pleasuring that my wife was set upon. I forgot all about it. Was it Dartmeet he said?”

“No: to Pixies’ Holt he was going,” answered Scobhull without suspicion. Then his master thanked him and looked at his watch.

“Of course—that was it. We mean to lunch there. Well, ’tis past noon and so I must turn, I suppose. I moved one fish, that’s all. Don’t you fall into this pool, for there are two salmon there to my certain knowledge, waiting for water to go up.”

Scobhull grunted and Oldreive hastened up the valley.

The Pixies’ Holt is such a place as lovers well might choose for tryst, and often have chosen. Here, in dense forest above the western arm of Dart near Water’s Meet, a little grove of sycamores shall be seen springing from the underwoods. And beneath it, great piles of moss-clad, fern-clad boulders rise and conceal a cavern that penetrates the hillside. This subterranean cell may only be entered upon hands and knees, but once within it, the roof grows higher and the

cave opens into a considerable chamber. In time past savage beasts were wont to breed here; but for a century and more this grotto has been sacred to "the little people"; and ancient men still remember strange things concerning them, still narrate old tales of voices heard in lonely places, of fairy throngs surprised by night-foundered wayfarers in the woods and wastes of the Moor.

Even to the mouth of the holt the bluebells spread a fair coverlet in spring; but now they had passed and their limp foliage straggled flat around the fruiting stalks. Wood-sorrel and polypody ferns clothed the rocks, and at the mouth of the cavern a great sycamore rose, whose bole recorded forgotten meetings of boys and girls. Upon it appeared many twin hearts transfixed and many initials rudely carved, but now almost obliterated by the growth of the bark. A shield of sapling oaks crested the boulders and through one rift in the woodland eastward, the Ashburton road was visible as it climbed upward from the river beneath.

Where sunshine twinkled like golden money in a netted purse of shadows, Hannah Oldreive and Nicholas sat together. Her letter was responsible for this meeting; and now she pleaded with him unashamed and he stood face to face with the greatest temptation of his life. She had asked him to speak with her here upon the public holiday; she had chosen this most sequestered nook as a place in all likelihood safe from every eye; but the object of the enterprise she had not stated. It was enough that she dwelt upon the overpowering necessity to see him and implored him as a strong man to grant this boon to a weak and suffering woman. So Nicholas, suspecting some further trouble sprung from her married life, sad enough for her sorrow and deeply interested in her against his judgment, kept the appointment she had made. He guessed that Timothy knew nothing about it, but he himself regarded the meeting as no secret one.

Now the warrener and Hannah sat where they had met; five yards from the mouth of the cavern; and

she spoke with a frantic energy and force strange to her nature, and he answered hardly a word, but stared and shook his head when she stopped to draw breath.

“Why for not? What rightful thing is there to prevent it? You forgived me first an’ pitied me after; an’ the rest I see in your eyes without call for speech. An’ I—do ’e think I feel less? My wicked sin may crush the life out of me, but ’twill never kill my love towards you. ’Twas evil magic took me from ’e, and be it to magic my whole life into hell? I love ’e—an’ only you, Nick. I was poisoned; I weren’t my own mistress—’twas a cruel devil’s trick put on me, no better’n if the man had raped me away from ’e. An’ be I to suffer him for ever? Can’t you understand? But I s’pose you’ll only hate me for telling you all this—you’ll hate me for daring to lift up my eyes to you an’ love you still. I can’t hide it, hate as you please. ’Tis all I’ve got, an’ ’tis my everlasting part—my love for you, Nicholas. ’Tis what will never, never die.”

She was silent, and then in a gentle voice, low and soft, made an end of the speech with her eyes on his.

“An’ while I can crawl, you’ve only got to call to me an’ I’ll find ’e, my love, so sure as the heather finds the hill.”

He looked away, stared before him, still silent, and clenched his hands.

“You gaze speechless. I reckon you blush for me; but do I care? I only blush for myself when I think of t’other, not when I think of you.”

She stretched out her hands to him, and the man, who had fallen upon this trial not dreaming of its nature, fought with himself that he might not yield and grapple her to his heart.

“You must have suffered sharp enough afore you could have come to this,” he said slowly.

“Is that all you think of! Can’t I never touch your soul no more? Have ’e forgot all I was to ’e and might be again?”

“What do ’e want?” he said feebly, knowing very well.

"You—you—nought else. You'm strong—you've got right 'pon your side. An' you do love me, 'cause when I axed 'e straight, you said 'twas an undying thing. An' you told others, as have told me, that all the blame didn't lie on my shoulders. I be yours—I be yours, I tell 'e."

"You'm married to the man."

"What's that? Be a thing as once was yours less yours 'cause a thief steals it from 'e? If you find it again, you claim it afore the world, I reckon; an' if you be strong enough, you take it."

He did not answer. Then she said slowly.

"I know what you think, but be too much of a man to tell. 'Tis that the thing as was stolen ban't the same. The thief have used it for his own ends. You don't love me no more then. Why should 'e? I was mad to think of it. I'm a thing foul an' useless—not fit to look an honest man in the eyes."

"You'm yourself, for that matter," he said vaguely and yielding a point by the speech.

"But I shan't be—not if I bide along with him."

"What do 'e want me to do about it?"

"Don't you know? You know very well."

"To take 'e?"

"Ess fay!—To take me back to you, if you can love me still. Be you so nice about what folks say? You never cared much afore, so long as you was at peace with yourself."

"That's the thing — an' yet — no, no, my dear woman — it can't be — 'twouldn't prosper us — Lord knows I'd love to do it—but you'm too wise if you was only cool an' sensible. You'll be thankful us didn't fall into it when this fit be over. To-morrow—to-morrow you'll wake an' remember an' be glad. Us must battle for our lives against it, I tell you—'tis death."

"A happy death for me. Better'n life as it is."

"Death to the inside of us I mean—'twould be a wicked wrong."

"Don't—don't say it. 'Wrong'! 'Tis a proper law-

ful deed, I tell you. An’ you’ll be a coward if you let me bide with him. No—not that—I don’t mean it, Nicholas—so brave as a lion you always be. But if you love me can you let me live this cruel life—like a mouse caught by a cat?”

He shook his head and turned from her again.

“I’ll kill him then,” she cried. “I’ll kill him for love of you, and come all bloody from him, an’ ax you to hide me an’ save me. I will—an’ if you won’t have me even after that, I’ll kill myself.”

Her eyes smouldered and burnt into his face. Her teeth were set and passion shook her.

“Be quiet!” he said. “Think dark things if you must; don’t say them, for you’ll be sorry to your dying day presently that you could. You’ve got a friend as’ll go to—to the devil an’ back for ’e—you know that—you know me—but—don’t ax me to take ’e—ban’t an honest thing—though, once I’d done it, I’d—I’d bless Heaven for ’e an’ go in sackcloth an’ ashes for my sins, an’ prize ’e above salvation. But us must go on living. My spirit’s all flowed out of me afore this terrible day. I feel a poor coward not to take ’e home this minute; an’ I be a worse coward still to hunger to do it. Us’ll go back different ways. Don’t—don’t, for Christ’s sake, don’t—I can’t stand it no more!”

She had flung herself down on the ground in front of him and pressed her soft cheek upon his boot.

“I want ’e—oh, my God! what I’ve lost—what I’ve lost!”

He dared not trust himself to touch her; he stood shaking and irresolute above her; and then, suddenly, Timothy Oldreive sprang down from a steep place above the holt.

CHAPTER VII

HARD WORDS

TIMOTHY OLDREIVE did not immediately speak, and his wife, seeing him, rose quickly, recovered her self-possession with amazing speed, shook the tears out of her eyes and faced him without flinching.

Then she turned to Nicholas.

"I'm sorry I've made you look silly afore my husband, best to go now, for he'll have plenty to say to me as won't profit you to hear."

The men were looking at each other and still neither spoke. Hannah read fear in the face of Nicholas, but she reassured him.

"He won't touch me—he haven't come to that yet."

Then Oldreive spoke. His face was very white and drawn; his under-jaw seemed to be thrust forward and his eyes roved from the man to the woman, from the woman to the man. He believed himself faced with the thing he had half courted; and the fact appeared far different to the anticipation. He supposed himself undone and his voice shook.

"I thought to find you there," he said and pointed to the cave; "but I'm too late."

"You're a liar," answered Edgecombe, "an' you think a lie against your wife an' against me. Here we met an' here we sat for any man to see."

"Haven't I got eyes, you red devil? Am I blind? What was she grovelling on the ground licking your boots for? Was that a game to be played in the open? I'm not a damned fool—you know that by now . . . God knows I wish I'd been quicker; then I'd have piled stones against the pit-mouth and left you both inside to starve together and rot together."

"Hear me, Timothy Oldreive," said Nicholas sternly. "Don't choke yourself with passion, or you'll have a fit an' 'twill be my trouble to carry you down the hill. Your wife wrote a letter to me an' axed me to meet her here, an' she sent it openly by hand. I came as openly as she axed me. I walked along with Scobhull an' another—both knowed where I was coming an' who I was going to see. I stand here as innocent of any wrong deed as that stone; an' so do your wife."

"An' what's your word worth?"

"If an oath counts, I swear before the living God that I've not touched her."

"If you're honest, what did she want with you? Tell me that."

Hannah was going to answer, but Edgecombe stopped her.

"You bide quiet," he said. "He axes me an' I'll answer him." Then he turned to the farmer. "She wanted a bit of advice an' some comfortable words. She'd have done better to go to a wiser man than me, but she comed to me."

"'Comfortable words!' 'Comfortable words!' She's the sort to get consolation from comfortable words—isn't she? I didn't hear any comfortable words when she was rolling on the ground like—She wants a——"

"I wanted a man—not a damned, sneering, cold-hearted, selfish beast like you!" screamed out Hannah. "An' I comed to a man, an' told him I was sick of life, an' axed him for love of his kind to take me away from you an' save me from the sight of you. I prayed him to do it; an' that's what you seed—an' that's what you might have heard if you'd listened. But he wouldn't—he wouldn't touch me. Nothing will eat what the fox leaves. So I'll come back to you, an' be your dutiful, honest wife again. An' if you'd knock my brains out, or cut my throat, I'd feel you'd done me one good turn anyway; for a year with you be a long life to the likes of me."

Oldreive turned to the warrener.

"There—so much for 'comfortable words'! Don't think I ever loved the fiery cat—no more than any other thing I've hunted and caught. I took her to be even with you. But, by God! you're not going to be quits again—not that way. If I could prove it, I'd shoot you from behind the first wall you walked by to-morrow. Anyway, I dare you to see the woman again, or speak to her, or touch her hand. 'Twill be suicide if you do it. I've made you smart before to-day; but what I've done against you will be child's play to what I will do. I've got right on my side now, an' I'd love to kill you; but I'll do better—I'll—I'll——"

He broke off and glared at his wife with an expression that told the rest of his thought.

"Come you home," he said. "Your life's not happy—eh? Then I'll think how to make it so. I'll be a better husband—more thoughtful for your good. Not happy! Why, the likes of you have to know misery before they can feel happiness. If I kept you on a dog-chain, an' starved you a bit, an' cooled your blood in the river sometimes, you'd better know what happiness meant."

"Good-bye, Nicholas!" said Hannah, calmly. "He's right in what he says, an' I'm sorry I axed you to run away with me, for 'twas a silly dream. I'll trouble 'e no more. A dog-chain an' bread an' water be a very good thought, an' I hope he'll stick to it. I'll go home now an' cook the man's dinner, an' be a better wife to un."

"A very loving couple you see—till you comed between with your 'comfortable words,'" sneered Oldreive; then he turned abruptly and went away, and Hannah followed close at his heels without looking round.

Nicholas Edgecombe stood like one struck into stone through this scene. When the man and his wife were gone, he stared helplessly before him, and nature cried aloud that he had acted ill and played a coward's part. No consciousness of right done or temptation conquered upheld him then. He only understood that Hannah, his first and last earthly hope, had flung herself at his

feet, and that he had let her lie there. He only remembered that he might have picked her up and swept her husband out of his path like a reed ; but he had stood inert and silent and suffered her to return to her home, as a beaten dog walks behind its master.

The moral battle that had occupied him when alone with Hannah appeared mean and paltry in presence of the man. He felt a craven that he had dumbly endured such insults and threats ; he felt a fool that he had not rushed to grant Hannah's prayer. Something akin to remorse crowded down darkly upon him where he sat three hours alone in the Pixies' Holt. He hated his own conscience for coming between, and rage rose in his bosom when he considered the nature of the man who had talked to him as dust, and promised worse wrongs in the future than those he had committed in the past. He perceived that Hannah must scorn him hereafter as a worthless thing. He yearned for her with an unutterable yearning, for he loved her still with all his might ; her abasement unmanned him ; her future filled him with despair.

Now he resented the active moral force which had dominated that crucial hour ; he raged against the old anchors that still held him unsuspected. He loathed his achievement and hated those customs of mind, bred from the New Testament, that had guided in this storm. The supreme tragedy of human experience confronted him : he had done rightly according to his conscience, and his reward was bitterness.

But so habit, with hands of steel in gloves of silk, saves or destroys all men. Be they good or be they evil, habits work by similar operation with like subtlety and stealth. Destiny is woven of them. Insidiously they grow and root and dominate until characters are made or marred for ever. Only events proclaim this truth, because many there are who pass through their lives untested before men ; and these, in the secret chambers of their hearts, alone know their triumphs and defeats. But to others it happens that existence thrusts upon them the necessity for great decisions.

Them the world watches, and by their success or failure it is uplifted or disheartened.

That night Nicholas Edgecombe, plunged in deep gloom of spirit, bestowed a curse upon his guides rather than a blessing ; yet had he but known it, from one bruised woman's heart there rose a blessing upon them and not a curse.

CHAPTER VIII

PROMISE

SMARTING in soul Hannah Oldreive lay awake that night, thought of the warrener, and understood him better than she had ever understood him in her life before. Coward he was not, and she knew it. She only mourned to think what might have been. For the rest, in cold blood she was a little frightened at her own action, and, passion asleep again, she chastened her spirit with tears and with toil. Oldreive accepted her promises and said that he forgave her. Her reformation he set down to the force of his threats and it increased his contempt for her.

Soon afterwards an event filled the first place in Hannah's mind and awakened new hope by its promises to simplify her life and justify her marriage. She concealed the circumstance for a little while, but presently decided to tell her mother, and, upon a day when her husband was in Ashburton, walked from Cherrybrook to Two Bridges, that she might speak with Mrs Bradridge.

Chance brought Mary Merle upon the road, and some warmth of manner in her former friend touched Hannah's heart so sharply that for a moment she was minded to confide in her. The drift of their conversation, however, very quickly changed her mind.

"How be you, then, Molly? Haven't seen 'e this longful time. How's your mother, an' Teddy, and Mr Vosper?"

"All doing clever, thank you; an' I'm sure I'm very, very pleased to see you again—if I'm a friend, Hannah."

"Why shouldn't you be a friend?"

"I'm glad then; an' if 'tis in my power to serve you I would do gladly."

"You might, here an' there. Not but what I've got everything done for me any woman could wish to have. I works a bit, as you may have heard tell, but 'tis only for my pleasure. Tim don't like me working really—'cause the fools say he makes me."

"Of course they say things; but I—well, I'm very glad they ban't true, Hannah."

"Look at me. Did 'e ever see me better?"

Mary nodded.

"Bright as a daisy seemingly."

"My husband's comical-tempered, as all knows. But so's most other husbands as ever I heard about. How be Mr Edgecombe? I seed un last month but not since."

The other started, and her heart beat quickly. This name on Hannah's lips hurt her.

"He'm very well, I believe. Terrible hard-working chap he be."

"Works to kill his thoughts, I reckon."

"Works to kill rabbits—same as usual."

"Not at this time of year, if I remember right," said Hannah calmly. Then she asked a blunt question.

"How much do you know about him?"

Mary did not answer, and the elder woman continued.

"If I'd met you a month ago, and seen you loved him so plain, lost to him though I be, I'd have took you by your neck an' strangled you rather than you should ever have him. I would have, Mary. But I'm different now—I'm turned a lot better than I was. Matters have falled out that have taught me many things. I be going to be good—not for love of the living over much, but for love of the unborn. 'Tis only us women as ever think for the unborn."

She laughed without merriment, and still Mary did not answer. Then Hannah stopped in her walk and spoke again.

"So now if you say you love him, I'll not dare you

to say it, though all the same I hate to think that any woman loves him but me. Yes, I do—you may gasp an' stare. An' him—tell me—for I've told you secrets enough of mine—tell me true if he's ever looked kind at you. I can very easy bear it. Things have happened that make me think he's changed. He's terrible good. Does he look kind at you? Does he thank you for your service? Does he tell his queer thoughts to you? Does he care about your goings an' comings? Don't be feared to tell me, for I've got to hear late or soon if 'tis so."

Mary grew hot and cold, then faint, then painfully alive to her finger-tips before this terrible questioning. Anger surged up in her heart and she rebelled bitterly at such an inquisition. From Hannah these interrogatories were an insult—because the answer was "no" to all of them. Could she have replied otherwise, how different had been her emotions.

"Who be you to ax such things?" she cried angrily. "What be I to you, or him to you? He'm not yours no more anyway—an'—an'——"

"My stars! your pale face can grow so red as a rose, too, when a man's in question! No call to say no more, my dear woman, for you've told me all I want to know. There—I didn't mean to hurt 'e—I've done harm enough, an' suffered for it enough. That man was made for me; an' he knows it; an' there ban't no other woman within the four corners of the airth as'll ever be to him what he wants. Not your fault but his misfortune that he don't look your way, for you'd be so good a wife for him as any woman but me. The world's full of such crookedness—all of our own making. Yet, though I can't have him, I'm not sorry as you can't, since we'm speaking so plain. He be mine, an' mine he'll always be—for ever an' ever."

The simpler girl found herself almost frightened before these words. They sounded like a prophecy. Hannah was changed before her, and Mary for a moment forgot anger at sight of the other's brown eyes lifted to the sky, her brown hands pressed hard

upon her bosom. Then presence of mind returned, and she spoke.

"You'm growed into a different woman since you was a maiden," she answered quietly. "'Tis no sense to say to me you'm happy in your home, for your face gives the lie to it. Lovely as a dream you'll be always, but there's darkness where 'twas light afore, an' your forehead ban't smooth no more when you think of things. Why for do you say these cruel words to me? Why for do you laugh to see me leading a half life, with my heart torn out of me? You'm the first living creature to find it out, an' if I'd thought ever you could, I'd have gone a thousand miles out of your road this day to escape from 'e. You laugh—you laugh—an' stare up in the sky like a blind woman, an' say he'm yours. 'Tis a wicked falsehood, for he ban't nobody's, an', like enough, never will be. You'm in a wrong frame of mind, an' you very well know it; an' I never want no more dealings with you, because you ban't a nice woman no ways, nor yet generous. If things was different, I'd hate you all I knew how; but I don't, because you'm powerless to hurt me, or anybody. You can't influence Nicholas Edgecombe a hair's breadth now, though you might like to; but you never will no more."

Thus, with the utterance of words that struck deeper than she guessed, Mary left her former friend; and for a moment Hannah almost suspected that the speaker must know of those dark moments in Pixies' Holt. With thoughts roughly thrown back upon the past, she went her way, and only recovered equanimity by the time that she reached the "Ring o' Bells." From a first fear that Nicholas must have spoken, she quickly settled into absolute confidence that he had not done so. She indeed knew him well enough to be positive that no whisper of her own weakness would escape from him to the ear of any living soul.

Then Betty Bradridge heard her daughter's news.

"At last," she said; "an' if you hadn't done man's work on the land, and been so mighty busy one way

an' another, 'twould have come to pass sooner, no doubt. Please God, anyway, the man will take it kind, an' mend his manners towards you."

"He don't know it yet."

"I'm sure I hope I'll be forgiven for what I've done," murmured Mrs Bradridge. "All the same, I don't see how any woman could have done otherwise. 'Twas only my love for you, an' wish to see you well married. I knowed he wasn't perfect, but it always seemed to me as he had a gentleman's failings."

"No call for you to fret," said Hannah; "give me a drink of cider, an' come in the kitchen an' have a tell about it. Us go on very well now for a cat an' dog. If he threatens an' swears, the fault be mostly mine, for my tongue's more like to hurt him than his hand to hurt me. But he'm not all brute: he's never touched me, though he's had a tidy lot to put up with on his side."

Mrs Bradridge snuffled, poured out some cider for Hannah, and helped herself from a bottle.

"Come in the other room," she said; and then she raised her voice and called to Jane Wood to mind the bar.

"As to Oldreive," continued her daughter presently, "us be fast linked, an' us know it. But the chain won't be broken by me—not now there's a baby coming."

"Many be drawed together by such a thing," declared Betty.

"Nought'll draw fire an' water together, no more'n a stoat an' a rabbit—leastways, not if the rabbit can help it."

"Fire an' water work together, however. You an' him be mixed now to the making of an immortal soul. It should bring forth a loving spirit between you, I reckon."

"Don't see why it should at all," replied her daughter. "The li'l thing will be dear enough to me—not 'cause 'tis his getting, but 'cause 'tis my bearing. 'Tis a mother's pain wraps her in her child more'n her pleasure. I should reckon if a woman hates her

husband, she might be jealous of his share, an' often catch herself wishing 'twas all her own."

"I'm sorry you say so, because no doubt it means you feel so," answered Betty. "In breeding of childer," she continued, "the Devil can pack hisself in a mighty small parcel. But he travels sure enough, an' grows up with the young thing, an' presently begins to look out of its little eyes, till us sees un, an' says, 'Ah! there he is!' So he'm handed down an' kept alive from generation to generation. I'm sure I pray as the child will be all Bradridge an' not Oldreive."

"You'm getting religious seemingly," said her daughter. "Do it comfort 'e? You done a masterpiece of wickedness all the same, when you plotted to take me away from Nicholas Edgecombe."

"I know it now. I be trying to make it up with Providence. I meant well enough, an', anyway, 'tis wasting time to jaw about it. This here child—when be it coming? I wish I could have un for my own. 'Twould be light to my loneliness."

Hannah shook her head.

"Won't often be out of my sight, I promise you. I've seed un in dreams a'ready—a li'l red boy, perhaps. 'Twill be meat an' drink an' sunshine to me whether or no. Then 'twill grow; an' then 'twill set me sorrowing according to the usual way of a man-child."

"When be it coming, I ax you?"

"April, or end of March if nought goes wrong with me. An' I'll think it kind, mother, if you'll come to me."

"Much better you come here," said Mrs Bradridge. "That's wisest way—handier for doctor, an' all the comforts of the public-house under the roof. Oldreive can come an' go as he likes, or bide here altogether if he've a mind to."

Hannah laughed coldly at this proposal.

"He won't trouble you, or me either. He hates you now—that's why he never comes here."

"The evil conscience of the man," declared Betty. "Yet, growing old as I am, I'm sure I want friends an' not enemies. This year's shook me more'n anybody

knows but me. I haven't got the same easy readiness for making enemies I had, an' not half the sharp answers go from me as used to. Chugg would tell you the same."

"You'll never be friends with Oldreive."

"So much the worse, I'm sure; but 'tis little matter so long as you are. Pray this here child will do wonders. No man built by nature but feels something rise up in his heart at sight of his first baaby."

"Ban't his first," said Hannah; "us all knows that very well."

"Forget 'tother for peace of mind, an' let us all be friends if God pleases."

Betty kissed her daughter, and then, dissolving by painful stages, wept. Such weakness surprised the younger woman not a little. She looked curiously at her mother, then at her mother's empty glass.

"You'm growing very forgiving an' very wise, mother," she said. "Yet I never knowed the wisdom that comed out of a glass of brandy was good for much. 'Tis a new thing for you, anyhow."

"Never a thimbleful do I take except when I'm down-daunted, an' broken, an' sad to coldness thinking of you," answered Mrs Bradridge. "Sorrow such as I've had makes the blood go slow an' turns the feet to ice. But I'd blush to drink for pleasure, for never was such a thing known in my family, an', I hope, never will be."

CHAPTER IX

OLDREIVE DRINKS A TOAST

HANNAH OLDREIVE, despite the growing purpose of her life, while yet she waited for her child, led days of activity and provoked her mother to remonstrate. The winter passed away and her life was hidden from the world. Then came the time of spring sowing and dark fallows called to the husbandmen. Certain acres of tilled land awaited oats at Cherrybrook, and Scobhull grumbled while Timothy, concerned just then with hunting, in fine open weather, put the matter off again and again. So it chanced that Hannah, her husband from home, set men about the work and herself went to help them. With seed-lip on thigh she tramped the land and scattered grain upon its bosom. With that poetry of action proper to her toil, she passed along and sowed the earth in the immemorial way. Her brown figure promising motherhood moved with a stately step and slow; her round arm swept forth and in a misty veil of light the sun-kissed seeds fell from her hand. And as she sowed, she mused upon those mysteries of existence within her and without; she marvelled as to what manner of little one her child would be; she thought of the ordeal at hand and, entering upon unhappy fancies, dreamed that she herself might lie in the earth, her troubles ended, before this grain should quicken for the spring rains to nourish and the summer sun to bless.

Hannah worked very slowly, yet with diligence, then, wearying of the toil and warned to desist, she gave up her seed-lip and left Sorrow Scobhull and another to finish the sowing.

When night came she knew that her exertion had

been unwise. At dawn, therefore, she drove away to her mother and did not return to Cherrybrook Farm.

Soon afterwards a son was born to her, and there came an evening when Doctor Light, his duty done, entered the parlour of the "Ring o' Bells" and sat down to a meal there. He desired to see his patient again before returning to Princetown, and therefore delayed at the inn for a few hours. Presently, lighting his pipe, the medical man strolled into the bar that he might enjoy conversation with those assembled. A boy, long since despatched to Cherrybrook Farm, returned with the information that Oldreive was absent for the day. Hounds had met near Tavistock.

About the bar stood or sat certain familiar figures, and Merryweather Chugg was first to speak as the doctor entered.

"'Tis all right, thanks to your honour, us hears," said the water-bailiff, who still displayed an old-world courtesy towards his betters and entertained special respect for physicians and clergymen.

"All right as can be—no thanks to me neither, Chugg. A natural woman, and Nature rewards them when the pinch comes."

"Might it be a boy or a cheel?" inquired Axworthy who entered at this moment.

"A boy, an' I never want to see a better. I always say a birth is like hunting, you know. The world shouts 'Gone away!' and hopes for good sport."

Mr Trout, as became the father of eleven, had dropped in to hear how Mrs Oldreive fared.

"'Tis a fine thing when they'm more like the hounds an' give tongue theirselves with the first breath they draw," he declared. "I'm glad he's a boy, for his mother's sake. There's more interest to 'em somehow, though I've never heard anybody say why."

Doctor Light was talking to Merryweather about his wife's rheumatism and paid no heed to Mr Trout. Axworthy, however, continued the subject.

"To think her husband ban't here to comfort her!"

"A fat lot of comfort in him for a woman labouring

with child," said Mark Trout contemptuously. "When you see tom-cat comfort tabby, then look for comfort from the likes of Oldreive—vicious cur that he be."

"'Twill never say 'good-bye' altogether, I fear," prophesied the doctor to Chugg. "Your lady's not so young as she was, remember. Ah! the merry days when we were all twenty! But no good whining about it. If you can't ride you can drive. Nature shortens her credit with every mother's son of us as we get on."

Mr Vosper had entered to know whether all was well.

"Us must all meet her bills, I reckon," he said. "But 'tis bad, sir, when she gets her fingers poking into our joints for something on account."

"Reminders, reminders," answered the doctor. "We soon begin paying little instalments of the final debt, Vosper, and lucky the man who holds on sound as a nut in wind and limb over the half century as you and I have."

"My uncle's life was death," said Axworthy—"just death alive an' no better."

"The likes of him pays all afore they comes to die," declared Mr Chugg.

"A poor, pauper antic he was, blind an' crooked, an' his arms scrumped up like an auld apple tree," continued Axworthy; "death was the only good thing as ever he had to thank God for."

"I remember him very well," mused Doctor Light. "And a wiser man was he than any in this bar for all his darkness and poverty and pain. 'What do you make of life, Mr Axworthy?' I asked him once, an' he said, 'Nought, maister; but I grin an' bear it.'"

"Let fall upon the fire by his faither when he was drunk," commented Chugg.

"So he paid not his own debts but another body's—a very common way with nature."

"Her justice ban't ours seemingly," said Mr Vosper.

"No; flout her and somebody's got to sting for it, though it may not always be the sinner."

"Him that's come into life overhead might suffer presently if there's more than a pinch of his faither in him," mused Trout.

"Ah, Adam was the man for my money!" declared the physician genially. "No family history—no taint, no trouble, no ghosts hid in his bones or his blood."

"The son o' God, him," said Vosper. "If everyone of us could answer to that parentage an' none other, you medical gentlemen would be saved a sight of trouble."

"A great source of strength to the constitution for sartain," admitted the water-bailiff, "specially when you call to mind what men mostly are. An' yet first man of all comed to everlasting grief despite his havage. An' that shows the Dowl can work so easy from outside a party as he can from inside."

Mrs Bradridge appeared, and was greeted in a friendly spirit by those present. Having learned that everything prospered with the child and his mother, the head man of Bray Farm departed, but the rest remained, and seized the occasion for some additional drinking. Betty was much fluttered with the events of the evening. She wept and laughed in a breath, and sought her customary consolation.

"Ah, granny," said Doctor Light, "you feel a proud woman, I'll be bound, and so you ought to be, for it's a fine thing to see the next generation. I was a grandfather at fifty-five—three years ago an' more. Now nature will pat us on the back, and let us depart in peace when the time comes. For a single cradle she would give everyone of her graves. That's a fine idea, though not my own. Ah! here's the father—immortal from this day. Good luck, Oldreive, and reformation to you!"

Timothy, who had just entered hot from his horse, stared, and showed no little surprise at such a greeting. He was come from Tavistock, and knew nothing concerning the events of the day. He had called a moment on his way home that he might have something to drink, and learn how his wife did. The birth of the child astonished him, and for a moment struck him into silence.

Merryweather Chugg, a frank sentimentalist, and one

constitutionally incapable of bearing malice, now gazed with sympathy upon the young father, and spoke.

"You'm come pat, Timothy Oldreive, for us was just going to drink long life an' happiness to your little one."

"Any excuse is good for drinking—I know that; and I have a better excuse than yours, for I'm thirsty. A brandy, please, Mrs Bradridge. She's all right, I suppose?" he added to Doctor Light.

"Very well, very well; but you'd better not see her till to-morrow, if you can wait so long."

"I don't want to see her, if she doesn't want to see me."

Betty handed him his liquor, and spoke very humbly.

"A butivul little boy you've got, Timothy. Never seed a finer baby; an' Hannah so happy as a queen."

Oldreive poured water into his glass.

"Happy—eh? Let her be happy while she can. Children are only a happiness in their cradles, I've heard."

"Us all knows very different to that," said Mark Trout, "an' though I'd never bandy words with you, yet as a man with eleven, an' going to be married again next month, I say you'm about so wrong as you can be. Childer coniforts your grey hairs, an' be the joy of the State, an' a crown of glory to keep you out of the workhouse at the end."

"Excellent reasons for breeding 'em," sneered the other; then Chugg intervened.

"Anyways, out of respect to the new-made mother an' new-made gran'mother, us'll rejoice about it in a big spirit, an' hope the boy will be a treasure for his parents. An'tis your bounden duty as a growed man, Oldreive, to take it serious an' not with bitter-hearted laughter."

"I take it serious enough, I promise you."

"Well, ban't my place to preach to any man; but there's a lot to be learned in this world as only a little child can teach 'e. You'll do wise to watch un close, an' nip his faults in the bud, an', seeing yourself again

very like, put the baby right when he's taking a turn you know be wrong. 'Tis for his good I say it."

"What is his good to me?"

"A very unnatural question," said Dr Light. "You've had a blank day I should think, though you come home to a 'find' that ought to content any lad. Don't be such a sulky, glumpy bear, young man, and thank God for your luck—a lovely wife and a successful child. What more d'you want?"

"An' join the company in drinking long life an' kind fortune to un," said Merryweather. "Now, boys, altogether! A happy future for Hannah Oldreive's baby!"

They echoed him in various tones, laughed loud, drank, thumped down empty pots of pewter or clay, and gasped. Only the master of Cherrybrook Farm did not drink. His brandy was still in the glass.

"Thank you for nothing," he said, regarding the labourers with a curious expression. "And now hear me. May this child have the good luck never to taste manhood. May he go out of it by a short road, and his thread be cut before he's old enough to make any man hate him. That's what I drink to—the kindest wish I know."

He emptied his glass in silence, and some of those present began to hiss and groan.

"You cold-blooded young devil!" gasped the doctor.

Then Timothy without another word passed out from among them, and they heard him gallop away.

"There's a limb of Satan for 'e!" said Trout. "Evil will come of that, sure as walls have ears; an' I wish for my part I'd never heard him say it."

"An' I also," declared Chugg. "Surely never was known that a chap wished his first-born dead on its first birthday!"

"'Tis like cursing heaven, as sent the child," wept Betty.

"There must be more in it than we know," declared the physician. "Such things don't happen. There is always some hidden reason for a display like that. I suppose he doesn't get on well with his wife."

"An' her so good a wife as ever man had," replied Mrs Bradridge. "That I know, for she's the moral of me myself. Her body's bigger'n mine, but I swear to God her heart ban't."

Doctor Light grunted. He knew nothing of particulars, but had observed the woman's beauty.

"Some husbands don't like a wife's heart to be too big," he said.

"A good an' a true wife—you'll bear me witness, neighbours," answered the mother.

"Good as gold—barring a thing she's paid very heavy for, I'm sure," answered Chugg.

"An' she ban't afeard of man's work, while her husband is off at man's play," said Axworthy. "It was sowing oats, Scob says, that——"

A crash of glass interrupted him. Mark Trout had thrown Oldreive's empty tumbler upon the hearth and broken it into many pieces.

"I'll pay for it if I must," he explained; "but I could never take my drop here comfortable no more, if I thought I was drinking out of a glass as had been drained to cuss a baaby!"

CHAPTER X

DRIVING FROM MORETON

WITHIN a month of her infant's birth, Hannah returned to Cherrybrook Farm, and great was the hope in her own breast that the child might make home easier to be borne, and bring a little harmony into life. The peace of the inn, and the experience of weeks spent in one room, served to brace her spirit somewhat ; a wave of religion swept over her ; she read the New Testament while her baby sucked ; and she wove Nicholas Edgecombe into every chapter. For a space she looked upon him with new eyes and chastened mind. She mourned her follies with a very active intensity ; she brooded much, and returned reluctantly to real life, as represented by her husband and her home.

That the infant filled a great space in her unhappy existence was soon apparent ; but the boy's father at first maintained his frosty attitude ; and this he did, though Hannah's demeanour was modified towards her husband, and she tried to please him. There was no reciprocity, and the buds of better feeling withered untimely in her. The child was a bar, and not a bond ; yet, rather than be at the need to explain, when Hannah taxed him with his unnatural conduct, and wept to him for forgiveness, Timothy abated his indifference for a time, and, for some private end, pretended a regard he did not feel. He had slipped back into bachelor ways while his wife abode at Two Bridges, and her return bored him exceedingly. Yet, after the passage of months, it seemed that some right feeling smouldered into flame within him. He was, at least, not unkind to the little Timothy, and Hannah

gladly published how her husband had shared her night watches, and more than once walked up and down with the fretful child for an hour at a time to soothe his baby griefs. A few believed her story; others supposed, that with the best intention, she lied. Yet her tale was true; only she knew nothing of the thoughts in her husband's mind during that nocturnal hour, as he tramped the chamber with her baby close to his breast; else had her sleep been light.

This child kept Hannah more at home, and shifted her interests. Shame for a while marked her attitude to the past. She was very sore when she thought about certain things; and yet bitter-sweet pleasure lurked in the soreness; while her new interest in religion was likewise æsthetic, and of the mind rather than the heart. Yet she went to church when she could; prayed daily on her knees; and experienced a sort of repose that, while great in comparison with the past, was nothing contrasted with real restfulness.

Time presently overclouded this fitful sunlight, and she clung to her child as the only joyful reality left. Her true happiness, she told herself, was buried with the past. For gradually Oldreive found the strain of his present life greater than he could endure. His control broke down; he grew more than ever reckless; temporal difficulties increased, and fretted him into madness; and greatest of his troubles was the spectacle of his wife daily more absorbed in her child to the exclusion of other interests. This circumstance darkened his life, and soured his sleeping and waking thoughts. Because he believed that he understood it, and, finding no parental echo in his own being before this new-made life, argued darkly upon the fact and confirmed conclusions that had already poisoned his mind toward the infant before it was born. He watched the small face day by day, and was blind to the likeness that Hannah always declared and others also pointed out. Her persistence on this point, maintained to give him pleasure, in truth added to his bitterness, for he believed her object widely different

from the truth. She tried to break into his heart sometimes by force ; she humbled herself, and implored his forgiveness for her past levity and wickedness ; but he met her contrition with satire worse than blows. And presently he relapsed into active injustice. He absented himself for a week at a time ; and she knew that he was spending money that he had not earned, upon his own old pleasures.

At this season Edgecombe and Oldreive met again. It happened that the baby was ailing, and Mrs Snow, of Cross Ways, hearing the same, bethought her of a gift. And this she did, from no special regard for Hannah, whom indeed she held in slight esteem, but from a general goodness and that special love for little children so often to be seen in the childless. Farmer Snow bade Edgecombe convey the trifle—a mission the warrener stoutly opposed. Then his master explained that his object was twofold.

“I want you to kill two birds with one stone, Nick. The man’s away for sartain—always is. You can go safe without making a fuss, an’ just look around an’ see what’s doing. I’ve my good reasons for wanting to know, for I hear unrestful things to Ashburton. He’m in the hands of a lawyer man there who be as just as time, but terrible hard. There’s a mortgage—but no matter about that. You can look around with a seeing eye an’ hurt nobody.”

So Edgecombe tramped unwillingly over the Moor, and, as he stood on the little bridge that spanned Cherrybrook, where the river ran before the farm-house door, Oldreive himself was the first live thing that appeared. Timothy walked out of his house just as Nicholas arrived, started at sight of the warrener, and, flushing darkly, spoke.

“You! What the hell are you doing here? Stop where you are! I don’t want you on my side of the water.”

“As you please. I’m here about my governor’s business, not for my pleasure. Missis heard how your little one was a bit sickly, an’ she sent this here brave

jelly for un to suck at—full of good stuff. Perhaps you'll take it, else I'll have to push you out o' the way and take it myself."

Timothy had that day returned home from a fortnight of riotous living in Plymouth. He knew that Edgecombe could treat him like a rabbit if he pleased.

"No need to bluster," he said, and stretched out his hand for the pudding-basin.

"There 'tis ; an' I hope the li'l man will be better for it."

"No doubt you do," answered the other, leaping to high passion in a moment. Then he hurled the basin into the river and pointed where the jelly spluttered everywhere and the crockery splintered and scattered, and, sinking into pools and shallows, glittered up through them.

"That's the good it will do him ; an' that's how the bones an' substance of the brat will make a mess on the stones themselves some day, like as not. Bring no more of your trash here, or yourself either. I can feed my own—an' more than my own perhaps."

"The stuff was from Mrs Snow ; I didn't come for my own pleasure."

"Nor for mine, I swear. I'll not have you, or any other man near my house, or my woman, or anything that is mine. Once I thought I shouldn't care a curse ; now I know I do, that's all."

The matter in Oldreive's mind did not so much as glimmer upon Edgecombe's. He perceived the man was ill at ease and even jealous, but never guessed of whom.

"Keep your dirty fancies between your teeth," he said, "for I'm the last as will listen to 'em. Your wife only cared for one chap in her life afore she married you, an' I was him ; so you'm running your head against a brick wall, as usual."

Timothy stared to see how foreign was the thing in his mind to Edgecombe. He prepared to answer, but the warrener had already gone upon his way.

From that hour, for reasons impossible clearly to fathom, Oldreive hid his grand grievance more closely

and bided his time. For his honour he desired to believe Nicholas; for his hate he could have wished him guilty. He tormented himself and moved through dark channels of thought. He waited for a climax to the situation and knew that chance must surely bring it; yet failed to guess at its nature, or the part he might be destined to fill therein.

And meantime, Hannah's pride endeavoured to conceal what her husband displayed with cynical indifference: his own ill-fortune. Most hearers were sceptical though the wife told falsehoods with a calm face, and her mother echoed her; but to some her declaration carried comfort and they believed her. Mary Merle in part credited Hannah's assurances and Edgecombe received them at second hand from her and accepted the facts.

Once the three met, and Oldreive's wife, whatever might have been upon her lips to say to Nicholas in private, preserved a cheerful countenance and framed a happy story enough for the other woman's ear.

Edgecombe was driving a market-cart back from Moreton and Mary sat beside him. They had started at dawn to the distant village—the girl upon her mother's business and Nicholas for his master. Returning, they passed Hannah near Postbridge with her baby, and Edgecombe stopped as she held up her hand.

"Do give me a lift, dear souls, will 'e?" she said. "I've been up to Merripit for Timothy, an' a mile be a mile wi' this gert boy in my arms."

A minute later she was beside them, and in the embarrassed silence that followed regained her breath and began to talk.

"Now if you'll spread me some of they sacks, Nicholas, I'll be comfortable in the bottom o' the cart an' can nurse my li'l man."

Soon she had settled down and began to explain this long tramp on foot for Mary's benefit.

"Sure I'm very much obliged to 'e; I was quite forgetting the distance, else I should have made Tim drive me."

"Drive you in what?" asked the other woman without tact, but also without malice. "I heard tell from Mr Vosper that Mr Oldreive had sold his lovely shiny gig to Doctor Light."

"Mr Vosper would do better to mind his own business and mend his manners. Weren't sold at all but lent for a week or two. Us laughs at the stuff an' nonsense we hear tell—just because Oldreive's a gentleman an' pleased to take a gentleman's pleasures."

Edgecombe's face showed the liveliest interest. He had met Hannah from time to time since the birth of her child and found her very reserved. On those occasions no special satisfaction with her lot had marked her language.

"I'm glad to hear you tell these things," he answered.

"An' so be I," said Mary.

"For that matter I'm glad to tell them," continued Hannah with her eyes upon her child. Then she stole a glance at Mary and continued: "There's a deal of small jealousy against the man; but you'm both above it. I don't say he's an angel more than any other man. He'm even worse than many I could name, an' not perfectly good an' kind to me—I won't say that. But he'll mend presently, an' he'm very well to do, for all you may hear; else I shouldn't drink stout every day of my life—so much as I mind to. An' as for him, if he's the worse for liquor now an' again—'tis wine he drinks, like any other gentleman—wine as costs money."

Nicholas did not reply, and Mary nodded and spoke.

"Glad you've got money, anyway," she said; "an' I hope with all my heart Mr Oldreive will be steady an' good come presently. Anyway, 'tis a dear, dinky love of a boy you've got, wi' your own butivul brown eyes again growed little in his tiny face."

The speech silenced Hannah's pretended content. She gave a short sigh, hugged her child close, turned from Mary and winked her eyes to keep the tears back.

"He'm my peace of mind—him an' the chapel to Huccaby. 'Tis comfort an' rest to believe in Christ

A'mighty same as I do now. I be greatly pleased about that, an' I know you'm pleased, Nicholas; for 'twas you that taught me to try an' be good—though a bad pupil."

"Not me—God knows." Then he changed the subject, for it was painful to him.

"I'm thankful about the money, anyway," he said; whereupon Hannah saw to her annoyance that he had believed her. Immediately she tried by ridiculous exaggerations to make him see that she did not mean it.

"Money—oh yes—I could have lacework on my petticoats an' ostrich feathers in my hat if I cared for such things. Timothy's all right. And after everything be said, we be troublesome to the men folks sometimes. They've got plenty to put up with, not to mention their own troubles, as we don't share in. Nicholas knows that well enough."

Thus challenged, the warrener drew his whip slowly across his horse and replied; but he did not proceed with the direct subject.

"I'm glad about the money," he said again. "An' right glad that your husband grows wiser."

"Oh yes; we'm all growing wise an' grey together," she said impatiently. She was irritated at her own stupidity and his. She knew that the very thing desired had been missed. Her purpose was to deceive Mary and let Edgcombe understand covertly that affairs were not as she reported them. But she had merely impressed the ingenuous man with a sense that her prospects were better than he had imagined; and she had not deluded Mary in the least. Her indifferent knowledge of human nature had led her into this error, and her feminine intuition had told her of it the moment it was committed.

Presently Hannah, with many expressions of gratitude, went her way, and in her mind was a determination to rectify this mistake at the first opportunity. Edgcombe she did not desire to hoodwink for an instant; him in secret she often dreamed of and still let her fancies claim. But her cheerful

accents and complaisant mien quite convinced the warrener; her joy in her child and sturdy assurance that her life grew brighter, were alike taken by him for truths. Mary Merle, on the contrary, knew very well how Oldreive's wife was playing a part. That Nicholas should accept Hannah's statement so absolutely puzzled her, and when presently the mother and her child were set down and Edgecombe drove on to Two Bridges for Mary's benefit, she could not share his open satisfaction at this news. Yet even now she dared not call Hannah's statements into question before Nicholas.

"'Tis her baby have worked this good miracle, I reckon," he said; "—a great soother of a woman's heart for certain. All the same, Hannah was out touching that smart carriage he used to flash about in, for he sold it right out an' got five-an'-twenty pound for it from doctor."

"'Tis a very dreadful thing if she don't know the truth," said Mary.

"I expect she do—most of it. Who should if not her? Us'll hope he'm going to buy a new gig for her. No doubt he will," declared Edgecombe.

"Us'll hope so, I'm sure."

"Anyway I'm comforted a gert lot, specially as her goes to church a bit. 'Tis all to the good, don't you think?"

"Very glad you'm comforted, at any rate," answered Mary. Then she welcomed an interruption to this painful theme.

"There's Mr Chugg awver the wall by the peat cuttings. He'm signalling, too. He'll want 'e to give him a lift as you go back. But best to stop here an' let me down. I'd rather walk the rest of the way."

"Such a man for speech as he be—do never lose a chance of having a tell with a chap," said Nicholas.

Then he stopped, took Mary at her word, for she had but a mile to walk now, and presently, turning his weary horse's head back again to Cross Ways Farm, drove the water bailiff in that direction.

CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

WHAT might have been Merryweather Chugg's original object when attracting Edgecombe signifies but little, for, once in the market-cart beside his friend, the old man's conversation, inspired at sight of a young woman, became frankly personal. The matter rose upon a critical moment and chance, in shape of Chugg, now struck a blow that sank to the heart of Nicholas and largely influenced his future.

"Seed 'e with Mary Merle, didn't I?" inquired the water bailiff.

"Yes—drove her to Moreton this morning on her mother's business."

"Ah," said Chugg, "could almost have wished as it had been on your own."

"I did go on my own—leastways on master's."

"I don't mean that. I'll be plain with you as my custom is. There's things a man owes to himself, an' there's things a man owes the country; an' 'tis a gert question if you'm doing your duty by England in my mind."

"You always look at a subject in a big way. All the same I can't take your meaning."

"What d'you think of me?" asked Chugg, suddenly changing the subject. "Because, if you don't think highly of my judgment, ban't no use my wasting words."

"Since you ax, I think you do waste words," answered Nicholas, calmly. "No man ever I met talks more sense; but I reckon you talks too much. You might get over more ground of a day if you wasn't so fond of

speech. Not but what 'tis always a grateful thing to me to hear you tell."

Mr Chugg was surprised, though not in the least annoyed, at this criticism.

"You'm the sort that says what you think, sweet or sour," he replied, placidly. "I'll consider what you say, Nicholas. Maybe I am too much given to speech; but I won't allow it comes between me an' my work. You mustn't say that."

"Well, I'll draw that back then," answered the warrener; "only too many words be worse than not enough, for they'll often leave a man's meaning foggy."

"'Tis a kicklish thing to say what I be going to say. All the same, say it I shall, an' so clear as I can. An' you must take it as 'tis meant. How old be you?"

"Thirty-three, very near."

"Well, I was married at twenty-two, an' have never wished once I'd done different."

"You'm one of the lucky ones! What's that to me?"

"To be plain, 'tis a good example to you. Part of our proper business be to increase an' multiply, according to almost the first thing God said to Adam when He gived the man his lady. Now, I could have wished very much as my darter Jenny had filled your eye, but she didn't take your fancy no more'n you caught hers. All the same, it ban't good for a man to live alone, an' nought enlarges the view like a wife—that's granted by all married men. 'Twill turn some mellow an' some bitter; 'twill bring out the best an' worst in a man, like autumn ripens good fruits an' poisonous berries all together; but either way 'tis a proper test of character ordained by Scripture. An' to cut myself short, you ought to think of it. In fact, I'll make bold to say you have thought of it a good deal of late days."

"No such thing, Merryweather. An' as to Scripture, us ban't all bid to take wives. Come to that, the Saviour——"

"Hold there!" said Mr Chugg. "Hold there, Nicholas. You mustn't take no rule from that. You must always keep in mind with all humbleness of spirit that the Lord of Hosts weren't a married man. He

hadn't time to take family cares upon Him. The whole world was His family, so there wasn't no call for Him to enlarge His mind that way. Yet things do happen that us might almost fancy God's self couldn't grasp hold of like a man with a clacking wife can. Be that as it will, three parts of human life are hid from a bachelor—or should be."

"A lot goes to marriage, water bailiff. 'Tis a give an' take deal; an' I've nought to give any maiden that be worth the offering."

"You had no more two years ago than you have now—not so much if you'm a saving man."

"Ban't that. I offered Hannah love an' worship."

"All the same, Edgcombe, there's another woman as 'pears to me to have a sort of claim upon you."

"You'm out there—so wrong as ever you was. No woman living have any claim on me. There's only one woman I do more than pass the time of day with now; an' that's Mary Merle."

"Well, what against she? Did you ever meet a truer, honester, simpler maiden? I never did, though I've got my own darters."

"Good as gold. I know that very well; an' her mother, too."

There was a pause, then Chugg proceeded upon delicate ground.

"Have 'e ever thought what a lot you see of her off an' on?"

"Can't say as I have."

"Have 'e ever thought what 'tis to have your coat mended an' your socks darned an' such like by a young woman as ban't no relation?"

"She axed to do it—she had such a lot of spare time on her hands."

Mr Chugg laughed outright.

"An' do girls offer for to mend a strange man's hosen for something to do? I never heard as there was much spare time to kill at Bray Farm. Nobody ever comed to Vosper or t'other chaps there to mend their socks for love, I believe."

"You said 'a claim.' That's a very uneasy word for me to hear."

"No reason why it should be. 'Tis an old man's part to lift the scales off a young man's eyes sometimes; for 'tis the puppy not the growed dog be blindest. You can't see for yourself, so I'll tell you. That girl be cut out for a pattern of a wife, an' she'm in love with you; an' though she've hid it so careful as a bird her nest, such a thing will out at the eyes and by the prank of the blood. My wife seed it bring a rose into her cheek; an' her said it to Mrs Merle, an' she allowed 'twas true, for her mother's eyes had marked it long since. An' I say that the woman be a good fortune sent to you. So now you know how 'tis."

Silence fell between Edgecombe and Merryweather Chugg. Only the cart wheels creaked, and the horse knocked his shoes together as he went.

"This be a terrible curious thing you've told me," said Nicholas at length, "a terrible thing sure enough."

"The sight of her at your elbow in this here trap put it in my mind to speak. No offence given or took, I hope."

"None at all."

"Us must do our bounden duty."

"'Duty,' you say!"

"I be speaking for myself, not you. I held it my duty to say what I knowed, an' I've done it."

"Such a fool I am, an' such a selfish chap—always wrapped in my own thoughts."

"What you've got to do is to go back along over your life very careful an' ax yourself how you stand towards her."

"This be like a thunder-bolt, an' I'm very doubtful of the truth of it. No offence to you; but just ax yourself what any mortal girl could see in me when you think of all that's past. An' the world full of young, bright-faced men wi'out a care. I tell you I've got into a strange sort of way of thinking upon her. Though she wasn't for me, yet, somehow, I be

still for her—Hannah Oldreive I mean. I can't tell, no more'n the dead, how my mind have growed to see her, yet there 'tis ; I've never been a free man since us was tokened. She took all I had to give like—even to this day my interest in her be sharper than ever it could be for any other woman. It sounds wicked like, but I'll swear it ban't that."

"Wicked or not, it sounds mighty foolish," answered Chugg. "An' if I didn't know you I should judge you'd got guilty thoughts towards her. You mustn't waste all your life mooning after a bad woman you'm well rid of."

"Not bad—only a bit fiery an' quick to act without thinking. She've had her trials an' punishments. She've kicked against the pricks same as I have—I know that very well ; but now her way be getting easier, an' her mind is happy again. Her child grows, an' her man have got some saving grace in him after all. She told me these things with her own lips not an hour ago. An' I——"

"We'm talking about Mary Merle, not t'other. Hannah Oldreive have got to live her life without help from you. Them as choose their own way mustn't grumble if there be a plenty stones for their shins."

"Yet, if God A'mighty's like us, He loves a beautiful thing, an' so much the more because He made her."

"Us be talking of Mary Merle, an' such loveliness as the Lord takes note of ban't a matter of soft skin, or a round bosom, or a mane o' wonnerful hair. 'Tis inside, an' looks out of a man or woman's eyes whether they be brown, or blue, or any other colour. That maid at Bray Farm—she'm a bonny maid an' worth a wilderness of Hannahs in any market."

"No call to compare them as I can see. Us be talking of Mary as you say. You've set me thinking, for this is a serious matter. An' yet—such a thing must come natural into a man's mind surely—not be put into it by another man ?"

"As to falling in love, yes," answered Merryweather ; "an' if any chap had named a woman to me as I have to you this evening, I should have showed temper without a doubt. But yours be quite a different case, because of the past an' because of your frozen mind. You'm too much thrown in 'pon your own brain—as be a very bad thing for a young man. You can't fall in love at my bidding I very well know, but you can open your eyes, an' look back an' forward an' consider of your duty."

"You said 'a claim,' and I reckon 'twas much too strong a word, an' I'd be glad if you'd call it back, please."

The water bailiff reflected upon this point. He, too, adjudged the word ill-chosen, yet so convinced was he that Nicholas wanted a wife for the good of his soul, that he felt disposed to stick to the first assertion. Then he remembered how the warrener had spoken concerning Hannah Oldreive, and decided that such an attitude towards an old sweetheart must be unwholesome. She should have vanished out of his mind long since, yet still was in it. A bond at once absurd and mysterious appeared to exist between them. Such an idea was monstrous in Mr Chugg's view and merited the strongest condemnation. He hesitated to blame, however, because the moment was past and he had no desire to return to Hannah ; but he held it all the more reasonable to put the matter of the other woman as forcibly as possible. He convinced himself that in the interests of right and of Edgecombe's future prosperity, no speech was too strong. Therefore he spoke :

"In all soberness the word's the truth and I won't draw it back. Because 'tis a question whether her love for you ban't a thing that in honour you should respect. That's for you to decide—none else. I do believe your happiness hangs on her myself—but us all have our opinions."

"That be shadowy, an' you'm not right to be shadowy in such a case. Do you mean 'tis my flat duty to marry Mary if she'd take me? Speak it out if you do."

"Since you ax, I do mean it," said Mr Chugg strenuously. "I mean it with all my soul an' with all my strength. You may think 'tis ridiculous, yet I say it. Providence have throwed her in your way, an' though you don't appear to see the beauty of Providence doing so, yet you will come to see presently. Maybe not for years—yet 'twill come. Us often have to look back over half a lifetime afore us can tell what Providence be up to. An' if us could always get the bird's-eye view—which in general we can't—us would always see Providence in the right of it. An' I think 'tis your duty to yourself—to yourself, mind you. Not your duty to her. That much I will draw back, come to think of it, since I have your word there's been no love-making. But I do most solemnly believe 'tis your duty to yourself—an' your duty to your neighbour likewise. For that matter, one be often the same as t'other."

"I be in a mizmaze along o' this. I'll think it over, Chugg. All the same I'd bet a week's wages you'm talking foolishness 'bout her caring for me—a sour-faced, disappointed man as lives in a hole in a hill. There's only one woman ever loved me after my mother died."

"Leave her, can't 'e! You'll make me angry in a minute. We've done with her. She'm happy, goes to church an' hugs her offspring. Get her out of your head if you'm honest. I say it's your duty to marry Mary Merle, an' I don't care who hears me say it, or how loud they repeats it."

"You may be wrong, however."

"I never felt more like being right all the same. Set to work an' straighten it out for yourself. An' what you reckon be right, that do. An' whatever you do won't make no difference in my feelings for you, I'm sure."

"You can't say no fairer."

"Then just think about it."

"I'll promise that, for there's no getting away from the matter now till I've thrashed it out."

"'Tis the honest way."

They talked a little longer ; then Chugg alighted and went down the Cherrybrook, while Nicholas having seen Mr Snow and put up his horse, presently tramped over the moor to Wistman's Wood.

Force of habit took him to a familiar tryst where he had sat a hundred times with Hannah and not seldom since alone. But now uneasiness fell upon him in this spot. It was haunted with many memories ; it breathed an influence and he knew it—an influence that in this crisis of his life might hinder impartial thinking. He moved away, therefore, pushed among the elfin oaks and sat him down in a green dingle where the trees bent round about him ; where fern and the great wood rush sprang up from chaos of granite ; where a network of briars and boughs pressed round about and hid the distant scene. Here he flung himself with his thoughts, lighted his pipe, and set his mind the task of retracing recent years in so far as they concerned Mary and himself.

CHAPTER XII

MORE WISDOM ON WHEELS

WHILE Hannah, warmed by maternal fire, in part believed, in part pretended that her existence had entered upon happier phases, her husband so ordered his life that the vanity of her assurances became more apparent daily. Her hopes first died out within herself; it was not until some time later that all others were similarly undeceived. She fought the facts, and made an honest effort to lift the man and waken his sense and self-respect. But she failed; and then, embittered by the powerlessness of herself and her child to win one kind word or thought, sank in upon her own heart, again conjured up desires that slept, again sighed at the hardness of her lot.

Happiness, indeed, departed from her, although she attempted to conceal the fact. One pair of eyes alone, and one mind alone, she desired might see and know; but Nicholas Edgcombe, after his last meeting with her, was closely concerned with the problems of his own life. He held aloof. He believed absolutely in Hannah's assurances of increased welfare, and was thankful at the thought.

There came a night when Timothy Oldrieve, returning from salmon fishing, found Hannah from home and no supper prepared. She had been to see her mother at Two Bridges, remained long in conversation and forgotten the time. When she entered the house, ten minutes after her husband, she found him eating bread and cheese. So she dropped the baby into the cradle and hastened to heat some broth, whereupon he begged her to desist and remove herself from his sight.

"Get away—you and your brat, for God's sake," he

said. "I want nothing but to be left in peace. Why the devil you don't stop with your mother altogether I can't guess. 'Twould be better for you and me too."

"Isn't your good name worth nothing to you, then?" she asked hotly. "Don't I toil and tell lies day an' night to hide up the truth from people? Don't I keep a grin on my face an' a decent gown on my back all times for your credit? Is that nothing when you think what my life is an' what your purse is? An' all I get, week in, week out, be curses an' black brows. Why for do you hate me so cruel? What ever have I done against you but marry you? An' whose fault was that?"

"You know all you've done against me."

"To marry you was all; an' for that you can't forgive me—such a coward as you be. The whole world's one grievance to you; every mortal man's an enemy. Tell me where I vex you; speak plain words, instead of for ever scowling sideways at me. God knows, I've tried to please you since your child was born, if I was to blame afore."

"You're a liar. Please me! Do you think my memory is failing? D'you think that for one moment all through this damned year I have forgotten that I found you in that man's arms?"

"Never—never—never in his arms since I was your wife. He'm bigger-minded than you'll ever understand—or me either. He'm worth a thousand of us put together. If that's your trouble, best fling it away, for you know the worst of that business already—you heard the whole truth of it from my own lips; an' may God in heaven strike me dead where I stand if there's anything more to it. The likes of Edgcombe be built to suffer from the likes of you, but he ban't built to make you suffer back."

"'Not suffer back!' I owe him the wreck of my life."

"You owed him the last chance of saving it an' putting yourself right. More'n a year ago, afore your child offered to come, I'd have gone to him, an' thanked

God for a great deliverance. If he'd lifted his finger, I'd have gone an' left you without one pang. That's a true grievance, an' you may make the most of it. But he wouldn't soil his good name with the likes of me. An' from that day I turned over a new leaf, an' you know it. All the little things I've done to try an' make you forgive me would soften Satan. But you—why for don't you shoot me an' have finished with it? I axed you afore, an' I ax you again. An' kill the baby same time, for I'd be sorry to leave him to his faither."

She panted and stood close to him with a heaving breast. She met his eye without flinching and waited for him to speak.

But no burst of passion ever leapt from Timothy Oldreive when such might be expected and appear natural. His most frantic ebullitions followed upon trumpery incidents of misfortune in the field; trifling personal hurts, or unsucess at sporting. Before great matters he laughed or stood silent, according to his mood.

He laughed now to see the woman in high wrath; he looked down at the cradle and then up at his wife.

"Go about your business and don't praise yourself so loud to me. I know your virtues. Good God Almighty! Why should Edgcombe run away with you? Why should he? He's a heaven-born fool, but not such a fool as that. He doesn't want to do me a good turn, I reckon. Why should he burden himself with a woman when he can——? There, I'll not say it. You know very well what I mean."

"You're a foul fly! You to judge him! You can't even judge me."

"No, 'tis for a clean-minded, honest, church-going wife and mother like you, to know how good he is. Damn you! Get out of my sight, for if I stop laughing I shall pick up my gun and take you at your word. Go! No, I'll go—I'll go—that's better. But this can't last much longer."

He started up and because the wicker cradle was lying between him and the door, he kicked it out of

his way and overturned it. The baby, though unhurt, screamed with fright at this catastrophe, and Hannah, saying nothing, rushed to his aid.

Into a summer night passed Oldreive, and chance sent a sensible man to him, though not one calculated to calm his stormy mind at such a moment.

Where little bats fluttered and uttered shrill squeaks about Cherrybrook Bridge, the farmer sat with his back turned to his home. His heart was sick and his body was weary. In arms against existence he brooded and saw no faults in himself, but rather judged his life most wickedly ill-used and cursed from birth. He knew his own good characteristics very well; he dwelt upon his generosity and harmlessness. He had only punished an enemy for a wrong done—the natural action of the individual as of nations; yet here was the skein of his days warped and tangled and ruined irretrievably. Now, weighing all the things that might have been meant by his life and viewing the reality, he descended into an inferno of the spirit and suffered as deeply as he might. He debated the taking of his own fate in hand and measuring out death. There had lived a man not long since in Cornwall who slew his wife, his three children and himself in one ensanguined night; and now Oldreive guessed shrewdly at that murderer's mind before the deed and speculated upon those causes that had served to steady his nerve at the pinch. He wondered whether his own life would taste sweet again, the fouling currents once removed out of it. He mused on the sensations of the hunted.

A sound of wheels aroused him from these reflections. A dog-cart slipped down the hill and its lights flashed through the darkness. Seeing this vehicle bound for Two Bridges, Oldreive conceived a sudden idea to go there and speak with Hannah's mother. He was moreover in some physical distress, for he had eaten nothing since breakfast. At the "Ring o' Bells" he might at least enjoy a comfortable meal of the best the house contained.

Rising from the parapet of the bridge, therefore, Oldreive shouted his request to an invisible driver.

"Get up an' welcome," answered the familiar voice of Jacob Vosper. He reined in his horse and Timothy soon sat beside him. Slowly they climbed the steep hill from Cherrybrook ; and as on a recent occasion Mr Chugg had preached to Nicholas while they proceeded at close quarters in a cart, so now the head man of Bray Farm gave Timothy Oldreive advice of the highest quality. But words just then were vain missiles against the bulwarks of the young man's heart. Jest and satire at the whole machinery of man's little days had served him better ; a purview of the everlasting statute had made him laugh at his own affairs and their diminutive proportions seen in contrast with the whole ; but Mr Vosper was nothing if not respective ; and when Timothy began to sneer at himself, the other, having no humour, failed to help him out of his bitter plight, though he attempted to do so.

"I suppose you don't want a hand at Bray Farm ?" asked Oldreive casually.

"No, thank you—we'm full. Who be leaving you then ?"

"All—at least they soon will be by the look of it. I was thinking that presently I should want work myself."

"You !"

Mr Vosper missed the irony and thought he heard truth. In sheer amazement he pulled up, then let his horse walk forward again, and quite forgot to shake it into a trot.

"Well, and what then ? I'm not the first farmer that's failed on Dartmoor, am I ?"

"No, no ; you'd not talk so careless, I'm sure, if you meant it," returned Vosper, perceiving that the other was scarcely in earnest. "Something have vexed 'e, no doubt."

"Nothing—nothing—lost three clutches of chickens with the gapes, that's all. For that matter I could die of yawning myself."

"Now you'm throwing dust in my eyes, I'm sure. Such as your life is, you live it wide awake—us all know that."

"I'm rather sick of life, to be plain with you. I don't mind talking to you, because I know you have an utter contempt for me, and nothing I could say would alter your opinion. So I tell you my life's a cruel joke—more kicks than halfpence, and none to understand me."

"Stuff! You, with a wife an' child, an' land, an' not a grey hair in your head yet, to tempt the Lord like that! I'm 'shamed of 'e!"

"A wife that's no wife, a child that's—but what does an' old psalm-singing bachelor know about such things? If you hear I've blown my brains out to-morrow, how shall you take it?"

"Mighty cool," said Mr Vosper. "I'll say you've thrown the helve after the hatchet—that's all. You've done worse than kill yourself, for you've killed your manhood, an' your sense of duty, an' all else that matters. What's left of you sitting here alongside me don't signify a jot. You've done suicide already, for you've took the life of your better nature—drowned it in drink, smothered it in loose living, choked it with senseless passion. What be left but a shadow?"

"Perhaps it's a pity there was no one to talk to me like that when I was a boy. But even then I'd never have stood it. Anyway, it's too late now."

The other instantly moderated his asperity upon this speech.

"If a man have heart to say 'too late,' 'tisin't too late. Can't 'e take thought an' try to do better? Can't 'e make a stand against all that be dragging you down? You'm young to throw up the sponge to the devil."

"If things were different. If my wife—If I didn't know what I know. . . . But, knowing that, all's vain. And to live is a fool's trick when there's no more good to be got out of living."

"Life's a dignified thing, an' 'tis only a man's self can make it vain—nobody else can."

"Talking is idle with you, because you talk from outside, and have never been inside to see. What d'you know about marriage?"

"So much as most, I reckon, an' more than many. The man that eats the cheese can tell so much about it as the mite as lives in it. Your marriage ban't no great mystery, anyway. It would ax for an angel from heaven, an' a fool of an angel at that, to be the sort of wife you want. The woman wasn't born, except your poor mother, as would ever have patience with you. If you could only cast a thought over your own life, instead of always be spitting an' swearing against everybody else; if you could only think a bit about what you have done, instead of always crying out about what you have suffered, it might right your one-sided way."

"The world's against me, and you'd say so if you knew all."

"Fiddlesticks! The world's too busy to be any man's lasting enemy. The world haven't place or patience for drones in it—that's the matter. Not the Dartmoor world haven't. 'Your money or your life,' Dartmoor says. What was you born for? Have you ever wondered?"

"By God! often enough."

"To kill fish an' foxes, seemingly. But I say life was given you on purpose—not by accident; an' a set of brains throwed in too."

"And a father thrown in too—everybody forgets him. What's the use of preaching to the blood in a man's veins?"

"That's to say the Everlasting ban't all-powerful. 'Cause you'm born with a long neck be no good reason to hang yourself. Him as turned water into wine can turn bad blood into sweet. You pretend your part be all planned for you—a very vain sort of faith that is."

"Thanks—now I'll get down and walk. You're too wise for me—too good—too religious. A man in my fix wants bread, not stones or miracles. If I could meet a hungry beggar now, with holes in his boots and a mind lively and reckless from drinking beer on an empty stomach, I'd listen to him. He might do me good. You can't."

Mr Vosper stopped, and Timothy jumped to the ground.

"Good night ; I hope you'll learn sense some day."

Then the head man of Bray Farm trotted briskly forward, and Oldreive, changing his mind about seeing his mother-in-law, tramped all the way to Princetown, and put up at an inn there for the night.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEW OF THE MORNING

A T peep of day in a sleepy hour towards autumn great hazes hung over the land, and the eastern tors towered very dark against the morning. Dartmoor stretched grey under a drenching dew, and a steam arose from her ponies, where they roamed with shining hoofs and marked each his track upon the glimmering heath. Birds were calling, beasts were moving, and all the world had already awakened save only man. Yet he, too, sent representatives abroad, for in the dusky light Mark Trout and Sorrow Scobhull met upon the bridge by the "Ring o' Bells," Both had business in Tavistock, and they designed to walk along together.

The rotund man and his lank companion delayed a moment while Trout lighted his pipe. Dawn touched Dart, and she blushed faintly along her silver ways. Beneath the old bridge a framework depended to keep the cattle from straying out of their pastures by means of the river bed ; and now these hurdles, swaying to the morning wind, splashed softly in the water.

"A bridge bewitched, this here be," said Scobhull. "Seen from downalong, as you looks up the valley, 'tis for all the world like a face—a gashly, gert face with the arches for eyes, an' they broken postes in the water for teeth, an' Dart running out of its mouth. Things do take awful shapes, specially in the dimpsy light."

"They do in your rabbit's brains," said Mr Trout. "You're prone to think evil because of the man you work for. He sheds evil with his sweat. 'Tis a wonder the earth will grow so much as thistles an' ferns at Cherrybrook."

"Enough of them, I warrant you. One might say

the Enemy hisself sows 'em by night. A terrible man, Oldreive, an' I've come to hate him with all my heart of late. He'm not very honest—as who should be who believes in nought? A chap must have an anchor holding somewhere."

"He'll have his holding in hell fire come presently."

"A very uneven-minded man. He'm at his best upon the verge of getting drunk. Then he shows a gert kindness of heart as would surprise you. Will pick a beetle out of the highway at such times to save it from hoof or wheel. But let him drink past the turnpike of sense, an' he's not fit company for swine."

"You'll see a crow with the sun on him shine like a gold bird," said Trout. "But he'm no more than a carrion fowl really. Mustn't judge a man in drink for good or evil. I know—may the Lord forgive me, I've had my experiences. There'll be a tidy few found drunk on the Day of Doom, no doubt; for a sinking world be worse than a sinking ship; but the A'mighty Judge won't take no 'count of their silly tears an' prayers, nor yet be too hard upon 'em."

"He drinks more'n he used to drink. He punishes hisself with brandy for choice."

"To drink brandy is to build up your own judgment under your own waistcoat. Don't you never do it, Scob, for your brain ban't built to stand it."

As they breasted the first hill and left Bair Down upon their right, a glen opened in that direction, and glades were visible sloping from Bray Farm to the little tributary of Dart that ran through the woods beneath. In the mists, where they still hung dense above this valley, a figure moved—a slight brown thing. It bent over the green hillside, and round about it dots and clusters of pearly white were scattered in the grasses.

"Who be that woman, if 'tis a woman?" asked Scobhull.

"Mary Merle seekin' for the first mushrooms. Her made two pound four shilling last year by 'em. Great virtue in that maiden—more than in her brother, for

he've no thought beyond sporting. She'll make a good wife for somebody some day. But money's lacking, an' it generally comes first in the bargain, where a girl's got no looks."

"I'd take her," said Scobhull frankly. "For a time I was against all thought of woman after one gived me 'no' for answer. But I've come round to 'em again since. I should very much like to have a wife, for 'tis a gert stake in the world to know some human creature marks your going an' coming. As 'tis, old cartmare to Cherrybrook be the only living thing as knows my footstep from another's."

"What wages do 'e get now?"

"Very good wages, though, to tell the truth, he seldom pays 'em. There's a mort o' money owing to me. But I can wait. I haven't got a female to give gifts to."

"'Tis a great lack in life," said Mr Trout. "My new wife be the very marrow in my backbone already. A peaceful, man-loving woman, an' good to childer. Not so terrible fond of cleaning up as my dear first was; but so much the more peace in the house. 'Tis a very dreadful circumstance to be without a wife if you've got thoroughly broken in to the married state. To get widowed all in a moment be like suddenly giving up liquor, or any other great revolution. I wish you could find somebody, for she might cure you of your bad dreams. You ought to try—no harm in trying. An' you never know what they'll like. The most queer fashion of men get wives."

"They do," admitted Scobhull. "I've seen it happen no further off than Postbridge."

"But as for Miss Mary," continued Trout, "she'm not for you. There's only one man quickens her pulse; an', by all the signs, he don't want her. That's how things happen in this plaguey peep-show of a world. Not that I'd breathe any breath against Providence, seeing how my own eldest darter's tokened to a very respectable young railway-porter down Ashburton way."

While the two men beguiled the journey with such

discourse, Mary Merle, in the upland meadow by her home, was busy at a favourite task, where mushrooms had sprung night-born from the sweet earth. Some, still capped with soil, just peeped above the grass; some had burst their silver films to show rosily upon each frilled stem; and some were over-ripe, for the full-grown cowls of them had flattened out and tarnished a little; while their gills turned towards velvety blackness and their spores were dusting the dew.

A man's heavy tread surprised Mary's ear and, turning round, she saw Nicholas Edgecombe, clad for a holiday. He carried a yellow walking-stick and wore new leathern gaiters; for he, too, was upon his way to Tavistock and had walked across Bair Down that he might shorten his road and pass the Cowsick river by an ancient, pack-horse bridge that spanned it under Bray Farm. Now he and Mary met, to the astonishment of both. For her this early glimpse of him was better than sunrise; and to the man such a meeting seemed predestined. It came pat upon his thoughts as a climax just and fitting. He stopped, spoke to her and told her calmly that this chance coming together might change his plans for the day. So she did his bidding and, much wondering, listened.

It must be said that after those hours of reflection at Wistman's Wood, Edgecombe still found himself in doubt as to the future. He recalled each scene and incident in which the woman had played her part. He remembered the sight of her flying for help from Devil's Tor, the days at Bray Farm, the countless small kindnesses, the one tragedy in their friendship. Viewed collectively her services mounted into a great thing. So seldom any words went with them and so little stir was ever made about them, that he had come to hold them customary. Now he added them together and a sense of justice warmed his heart to Mary Merle. Under the light that now illuminated his knowledge, her goodness was changed in kind. He had assumed a sort of sisterly regard for a very lonely man; he had imagined that his affairs rather than himself interested

her to friendship. But now, if Chugg spoke truth, a different complexion shone upon their intercourse. He still doubted, and deeply doubted, the possibility of such a thing, for to himself he looked an unlovely object. As for his own attitude towards Mary, he could define it in his mind, but he lacked nice balance of words to utter it. He was attached to her, for he saw how great a part of his life owed thanks to her; but she was no vital factor of his existence, and his inner progress towards renewed content and re-establishment of old principles, if ever it happened, would not come about through her. She had mended the clothes that covered his body; the rent raiment of his soul could receive no stitch from her. Yet he knew she was a very good girl, and therefore supposed the onus of this matter rested upon him.

He debated his duty towards her, and, though he sat motionless in the drowsy wood until night had fallen, to no conclusion could he come. It was not until he met the girl, picking mushrooms thus before the sun had risen, that his mind became suddenly affirmed and he decided to speak.

"Mary," he said, "you'm well met, I do think an' hope. Come across out of the shadows into the sun. 'Tis too wet for your feet here, for the morning dew be ice-cold—not like the dew of evening, as falls tenderly out of the sky. Come down to the river, an' I'll find a stone for us to sit upon."

"So I will then. Look at my lovely mushrooms. An' where be you going so early?"

"I doan't know. It depends. Might go on to Tavistock to buy some ferrets as I want; might go home again. Things ban't too hopeful 'pon the warren for next season. 'Twas such a baggering cold, wet spring; killed scores of young uns."

"Well, us must go up an' down. Your last season was the best ever known 'pon Wistman's warren."

"So 'twas, an' I want to go forward, not back."

They found such a spot as he desired, where the lesser streamlet ran into the greater, and where the

risen sun, casting a glory between the folds of the hills, touched the river with dawn light, clear and warm.

"Sit you here," said Nicholas. "I've not much to say an' 'twould keep for that matter, but I'll speak it out an' then be off, as you bid me."

They sat facing the east. Mary's face glowed and her bright eyes flashed in the sunshine. At their feet Dart sang to the morning and a broad shallow widened from a little fall. First the water trembled away from beneath the foam, then it rippled onward netted with red and gold; and finally, all fret and strife smoothed away, it ended in the peace of the pool. Here a rising fish shattered the reflection of the bank and the sky. Mingled images from earth and air swam together at the little trout's splash; then they trembled out again and grew defined as the water settled to stillness. Rush and thistle, nodding grasses and purple meadow scabius were reflected in the river; and far above, the newborn day alighted like a golden bird upon each granite peak. From the sky and the river, from the hills and the herds uprising out of their sleeping-places in the fern; from the bee in the blossom and the bird upon the wing; and from the fragrant essence and spirit of this hour Nicholas plucked courage and said what he desired to say.

Yet he marvelled that it was so easy.

"Mary," he began, "I'm slow of thought along of having no teaching when I was a boy. Somehow, since Hannah, I've never been able to shake myself into knowing I was a free man. Her never appeared to be a thing quite apart until yesterday week. Then the truth comed to me when she told us all about her better fortune. Thank God she'm a great deal happier of late days; an' the happier she be, the fainter my thoughts of her do grow."

A tragic temptation to be silent attacked the girl. She knew the intention of Nicholas. To hesitate was to be blessed for ever; yet that he should take her to wife in a false belief concerning Hannah must cloud all. She spoke without reflecting, hurriedly, wildly. She

was thankful that strength had come to do it, even though her words might freeze those others waiting to be spoken to her. Strong in the conviction that Hannah was passing to full measure of happiness and needed him no more, he had turned to her as a free man. So Mary believed, and intuition told her that the other woman's prosperity was the radical reason of Edgecombe's attitude. Yet she knew that Hannah was never less happy than now—never less in need of a strong arm to succour.

To say so threatened her whole life's salvation; yet conscious of what must lie like lead upon her heart for ever if she kept silence, the girl spoke vehemently.

"You'm quite wrong there, dear Nicholas. Hannah pretended she was happy, because she didn't want me to think she wasn't. But you mustn't think so for a moment. She'm miserable in everything—miserable in everything but her li'l boy—an'—an'—truth be truth."

She broke off and turned pale. She clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. Then, finding him sunk in a terrible silence, she turned to him with a sort of dog's fear in her eyes.

"Better go on your way, dear Nicholas," she said weakly. "'Cause you didn't know—I'll go too—there's a plenty more mushrooms for me yet."

She rose and her knees shook. She stared helplessly at the hill as a thing that had risen suddenly in her path, unfamiliar, tremendous and beyond her power to climb.

"Bide," he said. "Bide you along with me, Mary. Bide always—for ever an' ever—will 'e, my dear? I'm a sad man for a sweetheart, but I wan't 'e for my own. I know your good heart, an' I'll mend my ways an' try to be so loverly as you deserve. Her I loved as never I could love no more, Mary. I'll say it, for 'tis but right. But I'm not in the thread of her life now. An' I'll love you better an' better every hour. If I tried for a month to think all you've been to me, I couldn't do it. Don't say 'no' to me, for I want 'e so much."

She held his arm and hugged it to her with all her might. She looked up at him but had no power to speak. He put his arm round her and kissed her wet face.

"You love me," he said, "an' you'll come to me an' bring a blessing along with 'e. An' I'm thinking, my pretty, that the old wood's a wisht place for a woman. Us'll have a one up an' down cottage with a bit of garden."

Then she spoke.

"Never, never. Your home be my home for ever-lasting. Your home be in the hills an' mine too—if ever I live to come to it—an' joy don't kill me. God's goodness. Oh, God's great, wonnerful goodness to me!"

She wept with sobs that shook her body, and he cherished her solemnly; then perceiving that his manner was too staid for such a moment, he threw himself into higher fervour. But a glory from within shone around the girl, and her ecstasy of happiness missed the fact of his sobriety. Indeed, the man's grave demeanour vanished away quicker than her tears, and henceforth his ardour grew into a very steadfast, very earnest, very real love. Their parts were interchanged, and now he begged her affection where before she had secretly lavished it upon him. She praised her Maker for the priceless treasure of this man's worship; she thanked heaven many times daily for a gift seen dimly in visions and longed for in darkness, yet hitherto as far beyond her hope as the sunset lights or the scattered gold of a falling star.

CHAPTER XIV

DART'S UP!

THERE came a day when Timothy Oldreive, suffering from indisposition, found himself unable to keep an appointment. The matter was of passing urgency; therefore his wife at her husband's bidding went in his stead. Her son might now be left awhile to stay in content with his father, so Hannah set off at an early hour after breakfast; and she had not been gone above an hour when the weather abated her husband's discomfort and drew him also out of doors. Here, in tropically hot sunshine, he grew better. An idea thereupon filled his mind, and, feeling called towards exercise, he determined to undertake a task that cried for accomplishment. The days had long come for gathering of peat, and those who trusted to the moor for their winter firing had since July been busy in the chocolate hearts of the cuttings. The rich peat slabs need plenty of sunshine to dry them, but left too late, they never mature, and a laggard often finds his labour spoiled by the autumn rains.

Oldreive took peat-iron and peat-knife over his shoulder, wrapped up the child in a little pink blanket, and set off for the peat cuttings, where they stretched along the waters of Cherrybrook near their junction with Dart. Here inky peat ridges rose out of old stagnant pools and the wreck of former workings. Along their dark crowns the blossoming ling made light, dry wisps of snowy cotton-grass still waved here and there upon them, and many small, lovely things thrived and bloomed in the morasses and trenches round about. Golden spires of asphodel leapt sprightly up; the bog pimpernel and the least campanula twined

their pale rose and azure together; tiny butterworts nodded above crystalline leaves; the sundew's glimmering rosettes and shy blossoms studded the marsh, and sphagna mosses gleamed in rich harmonies of silver, grey and lemon, green and russet, deep sepia and golden brown. The mark of last year's work was still upon each steep wall of peat, and there the square pattern of the iron appeared. At hand another farmer's harvest spread dry and ready for the cart.

Oldrive, taking off coat and waistcoat, selected a rich spot and began to work it. His child he placed in the shadow of a bank, and the little thing, with round, innocent eyes, watched a humble-bee that laboured beside him. Putting out a small hand, the baby tried to catch it, whereon the bee departed, to mingle his music with a great earth song, that throbbed over the Moor from the humming gauzes of unnumbered hosts.

With his peat knife—an old scythe set in a handle of ash—Oldrive cut off the rind of heath and grass from his seam of peat, then at the iron he toiled and soon had many a shining slab of fuel spread upon the earth. Anon he set up these pieces together in pairs, and left them thus for air and sun to render profitable by quick drying. The man felt his work soothe him and restore his physical health. Genial sweat bathed him now and manual labour, conquering the evil, cleared his eye and sweetened his humours. His shining weapon of steel glittered as he shore off the crust of the heath; and then he carved again into the dark cake below and soon had good wealth of fuel spread around him.

But now the heat of the hour increased and grew sultry rather than refreshing; the air became heavy, the river ceased from its merriment and seemed to crawl and sulk. Before noon the business of that memorable day began in earnest and a note of change and unrest stole upon the sense. Birds and beasts grew still; the honey-bees still stuck to work, but the face of the day changed and the secret of the day began to utter itself darkly by signs and whisperings,

by strange eddies of dust upon lonely roads, by the calling of the river and the frowning of the tors. A theatre of some tremendous aerial drama was building in heaven; great movements developed slowly; the sickly sun, swallowed up in colourless vapour, buried his head and shone no more; yet a lurid and murky light wrapped the earth, while the air was alive with sinister hues, scrawled and splashed like molten copper upon the clouds. Dart, suddenly turned to a watchful, sentient creature, knew and felt even to her springs the promise of the sky. Animate nature forsook all joy at life and cringed and cowered; but the fearless earth spread her bosom thirstily. Low clouds, like gorged dragons, panted forward with the hot wind; and then, from the contrary direction a black ridge suddenly heaved above the horizon and its peaks and pinnacles tottered and tumbled as it came. In folds of sooty purple rimmed with light the storm rolled up majestically and all living things watched and feared. Small birds twittered as at sunset; beasts galloped and herded in corners; a party of ducks, that had waddled hither, stood in a row with their heads strangely lifted up and their little eyes fixed staring on the sky, as though they saw more than man might. The clouds now broke along the great black wall and streamed out in fulvous whips, or rolled in blurred masses apart, like shells bursting. Infinite silence marked this phase of the unfolding spectacle. The dead leaf dropped still; not an insect's wing buzzed; no sheep bleated nor pony whinnied to its companion; only the muffled breath of Dart sobbed on the thick air as though she ran over wool instead of granite.

Suddenly, warned by the gloom and midnight silence that a summer hurricane was upon him, Oldreive sprang from his work. Running a few hundred yards to the high ground, he looked towards the storm-centre and saw that upon Dartmoor a tempest had already fallen. The crowns and steeples of the inner waste were blotted out and unnatural night hurried from the north. A livid radiance spread upon the skirt of the darkness,

where rain already fell. Then the sky split, and forked lightnings, leaping from the zenith to earth and back again, ripped up the heart of the storm and crossed its awful cloud-chasms with a network of fire. Thunder jolted and bellowed and made the earth vibrate to every peal. The sudden light painted all things with a glare of garish blue in Oldreive's eye. He saw his distant roof-tree already wet with rain; he marked each grey wall and spreading field extending upon the hills round his home. Everything stood out clean-cut and sharp upon his sight; and in that brief, intense dazzle, one object attracted his attention and made him forget all else. A young hunter was loose in a meadow, and he marked her now as she started and flung her head high and shivered before the lightning. Then she darted swiftly off in fear; and her master knew that she might easily injure herself in a stone-pent field under the terrors of the storm now about to burst upon her. Instantly he set off, ran with all his might to the farm, and rushed through the yard into a meadow beyond. Scobhull, standing under a doorway, heard his orders, and, getting a halter, hastened after him. Terrific rain now fell and man bawled to master under the roar of the storm as they attempted to capture the mare.

"Knowed 'twas coming, knowed 'twas coming. The reds in the sky three dawns together! Us be going to have awfulest weather within living memory, I reckon."

To capture the frenzied hunter proved a difficult and a dangerous task, and Oldreive, calling hell and fiends to help him, cursed the tempest as it scared his horse to frenzy. At last, however, not without risk to their own ribs, the men penned the kicking creature and put a halter over her head. Then Scobhull asked a question.

"Where's the baby to?"

"Down in the peat-ties, where I was working when this infernal weather surprised me."

"By Dart?"

"Yes, take in the mare and I'll run back. A ducking won't hurt it."

"No, but a drowning will—Dart's up!"

Oldreive staggered, turned pale, and listened.

Between the blasts of the thunder, louder than the rain, louder than the wind, like the sound of a moving host, or the rushing wings of innumerable birds that fly by night, there came the cry of the river.

"Storm opened on Cut Hill," shouted Scobhull. "I've been watching of it. Water's coming down like a wall!"

Timothy was already running to the valley, and in his heart reigned discord as wild as the natural chaos of the elements. Fate had willed all, and he was glad rather than sorry; he exulted savagely and felt himself a part of the storm—a son of thunder. Still he ran beside Cherrybrook, until, in the smother of the rain and wind, he suddenly found the water at his knee. This lesser stream had risen also and now rolled in noisy spate to meet the greater river beneath.

Behind Oldreive, soaked through his working-day rags, and with a furtive joy upon his countenance, stumbled Sorrow Scobhull. He had put up the mare, then hastened after Timothy to prove his secret hope. The storm buffeted him unheeded, the grey rain lashed him, the wind drove him staggering before it like a lean-legged stork; but his eyes shone, he rejoiced, spoke aloud and waved his long arms to the river.

"A heart! A heart! You've got it, you tiger! An' ban't mine! Only a little man-cheel sure enough, but human—human!"

And Dart, drowning her banks, roared to the sea with rage and lust to strangle all life of man or beast that should fall within her power. From the granite antres of the hills, headlong down the rocky places, boiling and shrieking over steeps and shallows, like a Fury with lightning in her hair, she came. From the playground of the wind, from the hidden secrets of her springs, swollen into a torrent, swelled to ungovernable cataracts, she poured herself between the heights;

and the noise of her passing was mingled with the thunder, with the reverberation and concussions of the air and the repetitions of the earth. Her hoarse raving ascended to the sky, and borne by echoing ravines and crags, fell upon the frightened ear; her maniac shout knelled death and disaster and set the husbandmen shaking for their beasts. Into the valleys she rolled; and rioted even as high as the branches of the trees that shadowed her. Her locks of foam were tawny and her current black. On every side she burst familiar bounds and fought to find new channels. Her granite stairways had vanished, her dimples and smiles were gone. Where, during the morning of that day, she had glittered and showed her snowy feet over the weirs; where her charms peeped forth under ancient forests, bent humbly to turn a wheel, or ran dulcifluous through the heather, now she raved, a watery Maenad, mad from fountain to mouth. Her rage rent the dark bogs and tore their entrails out, shook each primal boulder in its socket, submerged the lowlands and set earth trembling under the weight of her volume. And still the storm waxed and the river, in royal progress, rose inch by inch, foot by foot, until she crept over the grass meadows and spread long fingers of sullen light into the fields. These backwaters of the flood stared up at the sky and pushed to right and left in sheets of turbid water swept by sheets of fire. Rioting in her strength, gulping frail bridges, uprooting trees, surprising frightened sheep and tumbling them over and over to death, Dart rolled onwards; and now she bellowed along stony gorges that defied her; and now she undulated in billows between rain-torn lakes. Like cables twisted, her waters writhed where their actual currents ran over the river-bed; and at each sudden flash from above, their coils and convolutions for an instant froze into black marble fluted with gold. Mountains and precipices, hanging woods and glens, echoed her terrible voice, and many a mile away men listened fearfully, themselves powerless before that awful manifestation of power.

Timothy Oldreive struggled back to the scene of his recent labours with a dark indifference at his breast. The heart of the storm had moved to the south-east; already the rain decreased and a pale light, from which the tors crept forth, stretched across the central Moor; while the thunder sank to a murmur dimly heard in the louder tumult of the river.

Where Hannah's infant had played and bees gathered honey, there rolled and churned a flood. Timothy crept to the brink of it, leapt by hazardous bounds to a hillock that still reared above the drowned peat-cuttings, gazed round him for a little pink blanket, and saw nothing but the handle of his iron sticking out of the water where he had struck it. Then he set his teeth and turned homewards. Stunned he was by this awful circumstance, but sorrow had no share in his emotion now. For the human atom thus swept away sleeping to death, he cared not at all; for himself he was glad; for the mother he feared and wondered how this tragedy would fall upon her. The only tolerable thought was to tell her instantly in as few words as possible. The horror of the fact could not be lessened by much speech; therefore he would declare his brutal news bluntly, and leave the fact to work as it would. That he must be blamed by all men seemed clear to him. But his conscience was at ease as to a crime, for he had utterly forgotten the child. The actual truth gladdened him and took a cloud off his shoulders. He made great and good resolves upon his way. He determined that after the storm was over in Hannah's soul and this great agony dulled by time, he would condone her past and suffer it, with the little child, to be swept away for ever. He would be patient and even do what he might to soothe the frenzy she must endure. He would conquer her over again, and the storm should mark the opening of a new life—even as now the summer blue opened frightened eyes in the sky to find this great tempest was past. Only the harsh cry of the river and the lap and chuckle of a thousand

rivulets leaping on every hand to join her, told of the storm.

A distant shout hailed Oldreive as he reached his home, but he did not even turn his head, for already he had seen Hannah at the window, and perceived that the ordeal before him was nearer than he guessed. He returned and faced his wife as she entered the kitchen. She had hurried homewards at sight of the storm; but the rain had caught her a mile from Cherrybrook. Now she came down hurriedly in light attire, having divested herself of wet outer garments, and as yet donned no dry ones.

"What a Noah's flood us have had! An' you half drowned too, I see. Best to get out of them clothes so quick as you can, I should think. Be you better? Where's the baby? Did 'e take him with 'e?"

"Hannah, you must bear up against very bad, cruel news. The child—he's out of it—gone to glory. The water swept down like the sea, just when my back was turned, and carried him away. God knows, I'm sorry enough for you. But so it is; he's drowned. Once I wished that he might never live long enough to make an enemy; and I have my wish."

She stared and repeated the word dully.

"Drowned—drowned—what d'you mean? What's drowned?"

Behind them was Scobhull. He turned his back to hide his face, and bent over the fire.

"Many are drowned this day very likely. It's an awful visitation for summer-time. Whole crops washed down to Dartmouth very likely. I'm bitterly sorry for you, I say. I was at work in the peat-cuttings, and the child was asleep. I ran to save the mare when I saw what was coming. By the time I got back, your infant was in a better world, if such there is—taken from the evil to come, poor little devil."

She screamed shrilly as the truth entered into her. "Left—left to beat his little hands, an' strangle in the cursed water! May God A'mighty brand the picture of that drowning baby on your eyeballs for ever!"

She shrieked into his face, and he shook his head and turned away.

"Swear if you like. What's the good?"

"My little boy, my little boy," she moaned; then she turned upon him; "Curse you, you living canker in my poor life; an' curse your handiwork; an' curse the God that made you. Let Him hear me say it, an' kill me, an' send me to my baby—an' you to hell, you black murderer. Oh, my little lamb, my little, innocent lamb, I hear you crying for me!"

Oldreive shrank a moment; then he answered roughly,—

"You'll fall in a fit with all your raving. Your eyes are rolling out of your head. Go an' roar at the river, not me. I'm innocent of this an'——"

He stopped and leapt aside to escape his own death, for it threatened now in shape of a heavy knife hurled with all the woman's strength. It missed narrowly, and narrowly missed another, for the weapon, snatched and flung by Hannah, stuck two inches deep in the jamb of the door at the same moment that it was opened from outside.

A man entered with a little pink bundle in his arms and Hannah leapt at it like an animal and tore it away from him. She scarcely saw the bearer, but plucked his burden close for a second, then dragged it open and uttered a wonderful cry to see the child warm and alive and asleep. The knife still shivered in the wood a foot away.

Even sleep at that moment was too near death to be endured by a mother. She awakened the infant and slipped down by the fire with it. The men present she ignored. Scobhull crept into an adjoining chamber with his face darkened, while Edgecombe and Oldreive stood and regarded each other.

Then the warrener spoke.

"Hurrying up from Dart to shelter, I comed by the cuttings, an' the thunder was sent out of heaven to wake that child just as I was passing within fifty yards of un. I heard his cries an' picked him up an' ran for

shelter. An' thank your stars you ban't a murderer, if 'twas you left un there."

"I forgot him," said the other.

"Forgot to save your own child!"

Then Oldreive's heart broke out in fury and the pent up poison burst from it, as the flood had burst from the hills.

"No! I forgot to save yours! There—'tis out now and why I've let it fester in me all these ages, God He knows. But it was there all the time—all the time; and you've laughed to think I didn't know and never guessed I did know. Why should I save another man's child? Take it and its mother, and keep them out of my sight—whore and bastard both!"

"Answer that, woman—'tis for you to do it."

Nicholas spoke these words while a dusky wave of colour spread over his face and his jaw stiffened. He drew back a huge fist to strike, but did not do so. Hannah stood up and looked at them and called out to Scobhull.

"Bring me some milk, will 'e?"

Then she broke off and turned towards Nicholas.

"I wish to God the child was yours—for his good an' mine. But him as meant to be the murderer of him be the father too. An' yet I've been a faithful wife to that coward there—thanks to you. Why d'you hold your hand off him still? Haven't he earned what you'm itching to give him? Ban't it your turn to strike? Or does your great goodness kill your manhood? He've called you the worst he could lay his tongue to; he've blackened your name an' ruined your life an' mine. He've stole our happiness; he've broke my heart an' ripened me for hell—why for d'you hold your hand? Smash him an' comfort my blood that's raging in me like fire—kill him—kill——"

She stopped and put her hand to her side. Then taking a cup that Scobhull had brought in, she prepared to depart with her child. At the foot of a stone staircase that opened from above into the kitchen, she stopped, reeled and fainted. Edgecombe and Scobhull

restored her and she soon recovered and stretched out her arms for the child, and spoke again.

"I'll put on my clothes an' go," she said at last in weak tones. "Never more will I bide under this roof—not an hour more will I live beside that man!"

She disappeared slowly and Oldreive turned to Edgcombe.

"Thank you for your work, warrener," he said. "You'd deceive me to my face if you could, and make me think that black was white. But I know you—and her. Angels from heaven wouldn't make me believe you. If you'd come in at that door a moment sooner, I should have seen her kill you, and you'd have gone down like a bullock with that great knife between your ribs—you, or your child. Yours—yours—yours—d'you hear? D'you think your word can count against the thing I know? Do I forget the Pixies' Holt? You red, smug devil, always in the right—to men's eyes!"

"You know I'm telling truth for all your mad howling, an' frothing at the mouth," said Edgcombe calmly. "God's patience must be near run dry, for you'm vile all through, seemingly. Anyway, mine be gone from this hour; an' pray you, if you can pray, that you never meet me in wrath no more, you evil wretch, for, come you do, if right's right, 'twill be the end of you."

Edgcombe went away without waiting for an answer. When he had heard and saved the child, he was actually upon the road to Cherrybrook Farm after visiting another homestead in the valley of Dart. He came with a message from his master; but now affairs had made him forget it, and he hurried on his road towards home.

A heavy steam arose from the earth, and under sunlight the drowned moor plucked heart and shone. The rivers cried aloud, and, waiting upon the hill, Nicholas saw Hannah leave Cherrybrook Farm with her child, and ascend the road toward Two Bridges. She was not followed, and with a mind relieved, he went upon his way.

CHAPTER XV

HIGH RESOLVES

AT the end of one week Hannah Oldreive's steadfast determinations to see her husband no more were broken down by Timothy himself.

The circumstance that chiefly led to this surrender was a meeting with Oldreive after she had been separated from him for five days; but before that event much concerning him had come to the wife's ears, and assurances hard to receive when uttered by her mother or the familiar voice of a friend, gradually conquered her scepticism upon the tongues of strangers.

During the week of his widowhood, Timothy Oldreive's instincts made play, and upon the tempest there followed one of his periodic struggles to soothe his spirit and recover his self-respect. Reviewing events as a man not unintelligent, his eyes were opened for a moment, and he perceived the dreadful pass into which his life had fallen. It hurt him most to feel that he had ceased even to be a sportsman in his dealings with his kind. A right and just attitude to sporting covered many sins in this man's opinions; yet he had sunk even below his own standards—not with respect to beast, bird or fish—but in his relations with men and women.

He observed how his black opinion concerning the child had vitiated the very air he breathed; and incessantly he resolved that henceforth a wide and complete change in his outlook and behaviour should appear. For, despite certain words to Edgecombe, he could not really doubt the warrener, and knew well in his secret heart that he had heard the truth. Thus, within twenty-four hours of his wife's departure, Timothy had come

firmly to believe that she was faithful, and her child his own.

Now through Timothy's darkness there struggled light of a sort; but it lacked purity, and it emanated from no enduring planet. The ray of it, like a stormy sunset, roamed uncertain, and its transient glory sank into night even as a watcher gazed and wondered. From within himself came this illumination, and the oil of the lamp was pride.

Silent, lonely days without drink quite stripped the difficulty and obscurity off Oldreive's life from his standpoint. He was ashamed of what he had done, and what he had been. Penitence came like a new luxury of the mind; self-scorn was a tonic; enormous activity, stir and change were abroad in his spirit; he revelled in the novel emotions, and longed to stand in the market-place and cry himself a sinner. He was a little proud of the size of his sins, and determined that his reformation should be on a like generous scale. He proposed to propitiate his world by the expedient of universal contrition. Whether such a course would put him right with himself remained to be proved; but he believed that peace of mind depended upon it. Before the actual deed, he began to experience lively satisfaction at the thought of it; already, though not a note of his sorrow had sounded on human ear, he felt the easier for the intention. The penance of such a far-reaching confession caused him to admire his courage; the mere idea began to restore his self-respect. He was assured that no ordinary man would rise to such a height of self-abasement. None should be left out of this rite. He subjected himself to a sweeping commination, poured censure on his own sins with full measure, and then considered his neighbour. He amazed himself at his own large-heartedness in this matter; his resolves from the outset soared above their foundation in shame, and he glowed now at no thought of pardon, of forgiveness, of regained respect, but only before the spectacle of his own rectitude, as revealed by these majestic determina-

tions to amend. He felt like a martyr piling his own pyre in public; and, having secretly fed upon these resolutions, he set out to astound the world. He was playing upon himself the same deception that marked his action after the catastrophe to Edgcombe; but no white bull remained to slay. Timothy Oldreive in this case was the victim; for, after his comprehensive repentance, he designed, as a crown of virtue, to alter his life in every particular; and he doubted not that to resolve and to do were one. The pathos of his situation viewed from without appeared extreme. He was much in earnest; he meant, with all his soul, to keep faith with himself; he rejoiced in the speedy realisation of an impossibility. Of difficulties he was not aware; the brightness of his own magnanimity blinded him to details. He saw the harbour, but no lighthouse marked the reefs, no chart in his possession indicated shoal or current of that unknown sea between.

"It proves that a man can be straight and honest and a credit to his kind without all this tomfoolery of religion," he reflected, as he scanned the full dimensions of his scheme.

His first act was to sell two guns, and pay Scobhull and another labourer their wages. Then, meeting Mr Chugg, he walked a mile with him, and left the water bailiff incredulous and amazed.

"I suppose you're ashamed to be seen on the same road with me after what has happened," Oldreive began.

"Since you ax, I may say I be," returned Merryweather. He did not propose to continue this conversation, but the farmer spoke again.

"And so am I—ashamed to be seen with myself. D'you understand how deeply a man must have felt things before he can say that? I've been wrong—wrong as a man can be. I've done wrong, and thought wrong. I had a dreadful idea, and it was a lie all the time. I'm not the first man who has been deceived so."

"Pride an' ignorance be the yoke-devils as have

drawed you into this fix," said Chugg, bluntly. "An' who told you this here lie, if I may ax?"

"I told it to myself. I had some reason, but I won't dwell on that. Anyway, a lie it was, and I know it now, and I am ashamed of myself. Ashamed. D'you hear that? And I want every man to forgive me any wrong I may have done against him. I am sorry for my wrong-doing with all my heart."

Chugg nodded.

"I hope brave deeds will come after these brave words. 'Tis well to start a clean sheet now an' again—with God an' man. The Almighty's always willing; an' even man as a rule—after you've paid the price."

"I've not done my whole duty to my neighbour and I very well know it. I'm making a clean breast of it, you see. I want to have friends. I hate and loathe men to turn their backs on me as if I wasn't a clean thing. If I've done you any wrong at any time, I'm sorry for it, and I ask you now to forgive me for it."

"Well, well! Wonders in the land of Ham, I'm sure. As to that, Timothy Oldreive, I don't charge you with any act against me but evil words. Many enough of them. You've said things against me, such as I didn't do my work properly, an' you've said things against principalities an' powers an' the Lord of Life. But they went in one ear an' out at t'other. Such speeches don't hurt a Christian heart, except for the man who speaks 'em. I'm sure I thank God to see you so properly sorry, because there ban't no hope for a sinner till the load of his sins do begin to gall his back a bit. Never sleep on this here frame of mind, but act on it. Be busy while the Lord's calling. If you'll take an old man's advice——"

"I don't want advice. I feel all you say and more, much more. But I don't want sermons. I'm going to act a sermon myself. I come at these thoughts a different way to yours; but I know right from wrong very well, and if you watch me from to-day forward you'll see I do."

Upon this grandiloquent prophecy, the farmer left

Mr Chugg and struck over the hills to find Edgecombe. Him he did not see at that time, but met Mary Merle by Wistman's Wood and fell into conversation with her. At first upon his approach she showed terror, but he stilled it; he accused himself before her with patronising complacency; he explained how a man of any blood shall always be found as great in his virtues as his sins; he invited her forgiveness for the least unremembered wrong or slight; and he left her with a sort of hazy understanding that Timothy Oldreive would in future stand for a pattern and exemplar to the country-side.

"And what be the man going to rely upon?" inquired her mother, when she returned home and spoke of her adventure.

"On himself by all accounts," admitted Mary; "he didn't mention no other party."

"Seems like as if he was beginning at the wrong end then, though I'd be sorry to judge," murmured the old woman.

"The road from sinner to saint takes a bit of finding, an' a bit of dusty tramping when found," said Mr Vosper; "an' the man who ever hit it single-handed be to seek," he added.

A day later, Oldreive, still in the splendid dawn of his high resolves, sought Betty Bradridge; and before nightfall he had speech with Nicholas Edgecombe also.

For the benefit of his mother-in-law, whom he met upon the bridge by the "Ring o' Bells," Timothy repeated and amplified his remarks to Merryweather Chugg. He swore most solemnly to amend his life, and she, who had never heard him acknowledge that his life needed amendment, wept painful tears and thanked God for a miracle. The farmer was majestic in his absolute admissions; he swept the ill deeds of lesser men away as mere mean errors in comparison with the gigantic edifice of his own wrong-doing.

"Beside my wickedness, the many sins done against me look small," he said. "My eyes are open. Even you—you, though you've been as bad as need be,

mother—yet you're blameless beside me. And now I take your sins on my shoulders and don't feel them. You were only a tool—only a small sinner. I'm the master-sinner here, and I'm going to make a master-atonement."

"No call to do no such thing, if you'd only go on quiet an' pay your way an' not attract attention," said Mrs Bradridge.

"Yes, there is—for my peace of mind. I'll show how a strong man can triumph over the world and over his own wickedness planted in him by his parents. I'll be a good man from this day forward, despite all my disadvantages and enemies—despite my wicked devil of a father even. If that's not something to be proud of, what is?"

"I'm sure I hope I hear aright," replied Betty.

"You do. I'm a reformed character, as they say. That means I know what life is and how to live it. I've gone far on a wrong road and I've got the sense to see it was the wrong road, and own up to it. I tell you that it wants a man to humble himself as I'm going to humble myself. Yet what do I care? I'm all for right and truth now."

So saying he looked down into the river. Dart was subsiding from the flood. At the centre of her volume she ran back with many a tawny swirl and spume-flake; but towards the banks this sombre colour faded into chocolate and paled to a dark amber in the shallows.

"Come you in an' see Hannah, an' have a drop of drink on the strength of this comforting news," said Betty; but he shook his head.

"Neither. I'm no half measure man, and that proves it. No liquor have I drunk since she left me—very likely never shall again. That shows what I am. And as to Hannah, my sin against her was the worst of all—the very worst of all."

"She'm quite of the same mind. She've had a terrible fever on her, as made her scream out o' nights an' dried up every drop o' milk."

"No brutality or violence though—nothing like that. That was her way ; but still she's right : my sin against her was the worst. So I'll leave her to the last. Meantime you can tell her these things ; and Chugg can tell her. I'm going to Edgecombe to-day to beg his pardon, too. Tell her that !"

"I'm sure us ought to see your face shine. I wish I could feel so good all in a minute," said Mrs Bradridge.

"You can tell Hannah you've seen the greatest of sinners, and let her know I said it myself, mind. And kiss the baby for me. Tell Hannah its father sent a kiss to it. She'll understand and very likely want to come right back to me when she hears."

"I hope you be right. She ban't in a very kissing frame of mind all the same."

"I'll see her perhaps to-morrow—she'll find a very different man to the one she left."

"You'm uplifted for certain—got religion, I do think, if it ban't too good to be true."

"Religion isn't responsible at all. It's will-power. Goodness lies within reach of any determined man—if he can keep himself in hand. I've been damned bad, and I stand here and say it to the world. Now I am going to be different."

Mrs Bradridge sighed.

"'Twould be so much easier if you wasn't so dreadful short of money."

"Money's got nothing to do with right and wrong," the man said, and his mother-in-law stared.

"My stars ! Who told you that ? He was a tidy fool whoever said it. Nobody can speak surer than a woman who keeps a public."

"Well, money had nothing to do with my right and wrong, anyway. For that matter there are ways of getting money."

"There are, Tim ; an' you've tried 'em all but working for it. Place mortgaged to the chimneys, an' the cash gone."

"Leave all that alone and don't talk so much. When

I begin to think, I'll find a way out of it. See what thinking has done already, and leave my affairs to me."

"Well," she said, that she might soothe a flash of irritation, "to leave 'em to 'e be like putting 'em in new, wise hands, if all you say be true. I'll tell Hannah the tidings an' speak my own joyful word, be sure."

He left her then and, in the evening of the same day, met Nicholas Edgecombe at the door of his cabin by Wistman's Wood. Their conversation calls for no full chronicle. Oldreive expressed the frankest regret and begged forgiveness. He painted his past in tragic colours, and displayed his enormities like a showman. The sinner proclaimed himself with the tone and bearing of the Pharisee. Edgecombe forgave readily and attempted to cut the meeting as short as possible.

"You'll always be welcome henceforth, anyway," said Oldreive; "and your wife, too, when you're married. I only hope, by seeing you more, I shall learn to be more like you and profit by you. Circumstances have been terribly against me; but I've risen superior to them now; and you've helped to teach me how to do it."

The warrener listened and tried to dismiss distrust as unworthy; but his loathing of the man remained. Presently Timothy began to applaud Nicholas himself, and admire his past conduct from the standpoint of the speaker's own reformation. Then Edgecombe, unequal to enduring more, terminated the interview with an excuse of work and hastened away.

Two days later the master of Cherrybrook Farm came to see his wife and child. Hannah met him coldly enough at first, despite the news of his reformation from various sources; but he broke down the barriers; he understood her and knew how best to speak convincing words. He brought tears to her eyes at his entreaties for forgiveness; he softened her by his behaviour to the child. A new toy for the baby was in his pocket; and for his wife he had a gift of a

brooch that had cost a pound in Plymouth. He had written to a woman there to send these things to him. He detailed to Hannah the phases of his conversion, and explained his future line of conduct. He dwelt upon the meeting with Edgcombe and in his narrative of that event put more gracious words into the warrener's mouth than had in truth been uttered by him. Timothy comforted his wife if he failed entirely to convince her. Yet, with thankfulness, with prayer and a contrite heart she accepted his assurances and hoped again. She begged and obtained his forgiveness for her manifold follies, and she presently returned to her home.

"Please God we'm both punished enough for all the wickedness we've done," she said an hour after she had entered Cherrybrook Farm. "I pray, Timothy, you'll turn to Him now. I've been on my knees for forgiveness these many days, for I've got most awful words an' thoughts to be forgiven. I ought to have been struck dead. But 'tis past an' I be left to try an' do better. An' man's forgived us, an' we've forgived each other, so 'tis only for God to forgive us now."

"As for God," her husband answered, "I've got a truer idea about God than any of the fools in these parts. He forgives before we ask. He doesn't want to be asked or wait to be asked. Why should He? Didn't He make us? He knew long ago that I should lift myself clear of this cloud; and so I have."

CHAPTER XVI

TALK BY THE WAY

THE sun scorched the heather red, soaked up Dart, and dried the great central sponges of the moor where they panted shadowless from sunrise until even Drought followed the thunderstorm, and, despite its drowning, the peat harvest was plentiful and good. But autumn hastened unduly ; the leaf shrivelled on the bough ; already there was a fear that the root crops might starve.

In September, Nicholas Edgecombe, walking homeward from Dartmeet, turned his thoughts upon matrimony. As he strode along with eyes bent down, he traced the dribble marks of drouthy cattle on the road, and was speculating without interest as to where the bullocks might be going, when he lifted his head, found himself near Cherrybrook, and observed Hannah and her baby in a heathy hollow by the way. The woman had long noted him, and her sight had been fixed upon his figure since it appeared over the crest of the hill. Now he stopped and crossed the green roadside and shook her hand. They had not seen one another since the day of the storm ; yet both man and woman had desired to meet, for each had something to impart.

That Hannah knew he was engaged to Mary Merle, Nicholas little doubted ; yet he had wished to tell her so himself, and the present was a good opportunity to mention it. Oldreive, indeed, invited Edgecombe to visit Cherrybrook Farm when he pleased, but the fact of the invitation itself proved sufficient to keep the warrener away.

Now these two were full of a mighty matter, and Hannah spoke first.

"'Tis good to see you again, an' me in my right mind," she said. "I've wrote twice to 'e an' tore both letters up, for written words was too poor for what I wanted to say."

"An' I've got something to tell you, Hannah."

"Let me speak first, there's a good man. Hear me say thank you, thank you from a full heart, Nick, for saving my little darling there—for catching him away from the water. I couldn't thank you then—I was raging mad along of seeing him in my mind tumbling an' turning in the river with his li'l clothes tore off an' gert fish—oh, God, it's made me an old woman! I rush to my baby an' hug un to feel he's there, even now by night an' day, when I think of it. An' you to thank that he's still here! I don't say these things to Timothy, 'cause they hurt him. Yet I praise God even for that nightmare time, 'cause it was the beginning of my husband doing better. You'm a masterpiece, Nick, an' I'll never know why I was thrust into your life to plague it, but——"

"Look on in front, Hannah, an' think of your little lad an' his faither. Now my news: I'm going to marry Mary Merle presently."

"As if I didn't know! An' with all my heart now I can wish you joy in her, though 'twill be a deal less than you deserve. I knowed you'd tell me yourself. Not that there was any call you should, yet, somehow, betwixt you an' me there's never no secrets. Mary has loved you pretty near since first she met you. I've seen that for years."

"I never did, like a fool."

"D'you remember when she an' me fell out an' you axed the reason? That was the reason. But I kept her secret, of course. Now she'm rewarded for her faith. A very good girl. If I'd feared God like her, I shouldn't be Tim's wife to-day."

"These things be ordered. I wish I could have gived the maid a better bargain, but——"

"Don't wish that," said Hannah softly. "Don't wish just that, Nicholas, for 'tis as much as to wish you'd never loved me. God knows you've every right to wish it, but I couldn't bear to hear it—not yet. Some day I'll bear even that."

"You go to the chapel to Huccaby now, don't 'e?"

"Yes, I do, an' a pleasant thing. I wish you an' Mary would come some day."

"Does he go?"

"No, but he walks along with me to the door, an' bides about, an' carries the baby home. However, he's forgiven me; an' many of his good promises he has kept so far."

Nicholas spoke after a silence.

"When the Lord takes a hand in a human game, it do straighten it out wonderful. He'll come to it if he sees you sticking to it—Oldreive, I mean. He'll come to religion when he finds how much it does for his wife."

"He says he's got his own religion. He'm very pleased with hisself. An' of course he've got pretty good reason to be. I do think he'm trying with all his might. Only we'm so cruel hard-up just now. However, we can go away from Dartymoor if that's all."

"Doan't 'e tell about going. You, such a moor bird as you be! You'd never be happy without the old place in your eyes."

"I doan't know, Nicholas. 'Twouldn't break my heart never to look upon Cherrybrook again. I be coming slowly to see what matters to a woman an' what don't. You've taught me that. You tried to teach me when I was a happy maid, an' you couldn't, though you saw it all so clear yourself."

"Yes," he answered. "I reckon I saw it clearer then than I do now."

She started and stared at him.

"That's a strange saying from you. If I thought as you weren't walking that way, Nick, the light would go out for me, too."

"Don't, don't 'e think such a dreadful thing as that

Hannah," he said earnestly. "Hug hold of it with all your might. 'Tis the only road left for you—or me—or him either. Get your husband to church in a sober spirit if you can, or, better far, get him to read it all in the Bible. As for me, I'm so happy as a bee, an' I'm not thinking what I'm saying when I call things not clear to me. An' henceforth 'twill help me a deal to think it helps you. About Christ, I mean. Get Oldreive to it by hook or by crook. Such a fiery nature as he've got—why, let him once but see it, an' he'll fall upon it like a starving man on bread."

"If I only could——"

"You must, woman ; you must."

"You'm always my guiding star. An' like a baby I would an' I wouldn't ! I wanted you, then I flinged you away, then I cried for you again. But I'd have ruined you, my dear, an' the Lord you served knowed it very well, an' kept you out of harm. I'd have dragged you down to my poor level ; I'd have—an' yet—oh, Nick—with all my sins how I'd have loved 'e ! You may laugh in your heart, but I would."

"Don't tell me no more like that, Hannah. If you knowed the poor thing I be—blowed here an' there like a dead leaf. . . . But we'm going to be happier, the pair of us, now. An' that's good for me to know an' for you to know."

"Yes, you'm going to be married ; an' I be cleansed an' forgiven, I hope ; an' 'tis a curious thing that 'tis my husband has done it. I can say this now : that I've suffered nothing from him I didn't richly deserve. Soon he'll learn to use me gentler—I think he is learning to. It's lifted me up to see you to-day. An' if ever any happiness comes to me, 'twill be through you after all."

For some time neither spoke, then she continued.

"I told my husband I loved you two nights ago. I told him I always should till I died—just as I love the Moor, an' the green spring-time, an' sunset, an' other things that be beautiful in my eyes—just with the same love as I have to them I love you. . . . He thought upon it an' said perhaps 'twas natural, seeing you saved

the child, an' that you was a good man according to your lights. So there it is. If he can allow I must love 'e, I suppose you don't say nothing against it?"

"I can't tell; I'm shaken of late here an' there. I don't understand things very well."

"Right or wrong, 'tis as I say; an' Tim said 'twas natural; an' God in heaven knows my love's got not a pinch of evil in it."

They spoke together a little longer, then parted, each moved at heart by the words that had passed between them.

Hannah reaped from this event some fleeting shadow of contentment. She had spoken the truth, and was purified by the circumstances of the recent past. But that Edgcombe should not go out of her life seemed almost a condition of it. Her relations with Oldreive, while ameliorated, were not yet so happy as she declared; yet, despite his lapses, she felt sanguine for him, and believed that so many admirable resolutions must bear some ripe fruit. His failures she concealed when possible; but they were frequent, for the fret and gall of straitened means made against the man's reformation, as Betty Bradridge had feared. Secretly he still escaped sometimes from his anxieties by the old road of folly; though in public he had already won a better character, and his neighbours watched him with vivid interest.

For Edgcombe there was more pain than pleasure in this conversation with Oldreive's wife; and her last frank declaration that she loved him still quite overrode his spirit. Her changed sentiments, her confession of suffering, her hopefulness, her trust in prayer, all appealed to him with solemn force. He knew that he loved her as never he had loved her; that now, purged by the fire of suffering, very resolute to try and do right, she was to him a being frankly lovely in soul as well as body. He saw her as he had first seen her; infinitely beautiful every way; he remembered that she had endured terrible sorrows; that she was not yet twenty-five years old. The pathos of her youth ap-

pealed to Nicholas ; her attitude towards himself similarly affected him. Her imagination had soared beyond his own, and that she set him with the moor and the sunset sky in her regard appeared very fine to him. She loved him as she loved the spring. And how did he love her ?

For a time, after the loss of Hannah, this man had stood in widest opposition to his true nature and implanted instincts. Religion by an effort of will he banished, because it failed him at the climax of his fortunes. For a while he existed as best he might in mental vacuity, and attempted to fill the emptiness of his spirit with work and other worldly interests. But he was not one who could make his business his religion ; the mind of him craved prayer as his body demanded food for its existence. Starving, he turned back, and presently told himself, not without hesitation, that he was again under the dominion of his Lord. Life's first trial had pruned his luxuriant faith ; and, by pruning it, had perhaps made it promise fruit as well as flowers. A man may accept or deny the Christian dogma ; he cannot fail to perceive the significance of Christ's own blazon—a thing wholly different. "All mortals are convicted by its conscience" ; none can apply the criterion of that rule to his own conduct and not find himself come lamentably short in words, thoughts and deeds. Subtle souls despair thereat and hold it a working creed for angels rather than for men ; mean minds accept unquestioning for policy, but shirk a reason for their faith ; others—alike from among the lowly and the intellectual salt of the earth—receive with thanksgiving, for they discover no obstacle at all. Such find beyond those portals solution for every problem, solatium for every grief, a light to banish their darkness, a friend within the council chambers of God. Nicholas Edgecombe could claim part with none of these, and yet to him the old faith returned in a new form. Now the heart-whole trust and the enthusiasm of his former happy, unfulfilled life were wanting, and it remained to see what manner of prin-

ciple had taken their place. A supreme ordeal was quickening to birth in the future, for dark-winged shadows already moved in his path. How he would quit him before them, and of what temper was the armour that must shield his spirit against their assault none might hazard any guess. Of late his life had been hidden beyond human scrutiny. He went uneasily concerning many things, but no man or woman had entered into his secrets.

Now, as he walked along from speech with Hannah, young Merle came to him, and Edgecombe, full of thoughts of the woman he had left, began to talk about her.

Teddy's satisfaction at having Nicholas for a brother was only equalled by amazement that this great hero could desire Mary for a wife. His sister rose many degrees in the boy's respect when the betrothal was announced. Henceforth he ran her messages without argument, for it was like obeying Nicholas.

"Just seed Hannah Oldreive," said the warrener. "They'm a thought pressed for money now, but I think 'twill right itself. Come he turns wise, things will go better."

"Come he turns wise, I dare say they will," admitted Teddy.

"She be very hopeful, as well she may be, for he's going pretty steady—a changed man."

"You may think so ; but I ban't so sure that his wife does, for all she tells you. The chap do make such a noise that you might fancy he'd built a church. But he comed a proper cropper last night, an' I was down to 'Ring o' Bells' an' seed it."

"'Tis the natural thing to slide back here an' there."

"'Twas in the bar. He comed by appointment to see Mr Pedlar from Princetown, an' it chanced a Plymouth chap was over and drinking in the bar when Oldreive arrived. Who 'twas I can't tell 'e ; but he was a hard, tough chap seemingly, an' he knowed Oldreive an' axed un to have a drink. Well, Timothy wouldn't—told how he'd sworn off all liquor, an' made

a deal of splutter about it. Then 'tother said, nasty like, that 'twas easy to give up what we'd no mind to ; and he reminded Oldreive that he was a poor drinker at best, and that the leastest drop always flowed to his head. But Timothy wouldn't have that, you may be sure. He said how in his time he could have dranked the Plymouth chap under the table. He seemed to think 'twas an awful slight put upon him when the man said he couldn't hold a skinful and keep sober. Talk got high over it, then the man began betting money, and layed Oldreive a sovereign to half-a-crown as he wouldn't drink a quart of Burton ale right off without being muddled. Oldreive scoffed an' said as how he didn't want t'other's money, an' tried to pass it off ; but the man hung on to him like a dog about it, until, at last, farmer falled into a passion an' dranked the beer. Then there was high words, 'cause Oldreive, when he'd took the stuff, knowed in five minutes that he was bosky-eyed, an' had wit to drink some spirits 'pon top. Then, when they told un he was drunk, he said yes, he might be—along of the spirits but not the beer. Anyway, no man never wants to be drunker than what he finished."

"Well, keep your mouth shut about it. He felt pretty mad next morning, no doubt. I hope he'll bate his silly pride presently an' think of his wife an' go along to worship with her."

"Catch him ! 'Tis more'n a woman will ever do to break him in."

"Who can say that ? Not you, anyway. Wait till you know the power o' woman. Hannah's very clever an' very understanding."

They continued to discuss this subject, and Edgecombe, deeply interested in his own reflections, forgot that he was talking to a lad. Nor did he see Teddy's eyes fixed upon him in wonder as he waxed eloquent upon the theme of Hannah. He pursued his own thoughts aloud rather than spoke for the benefit of young Merle, and conversation sank into a sililoquy concerning Oldreive's wife, her prospects, her future.

Then Teddy suddenly spoke, and his words wakened Edgecombe from a sort of dreaming sleep, and threw him again into real life and the facts of it.

"Us have travelled four miles an' be blessed if you've named Mary once," said the boy.

CHAPTER XVII

MARY TELLS HER MIND

ANOTHER trapping season took its place in Edgecombe's round of labour, and again his copper wires glittered a hand's-breadth high upon the rabbit-ways. There came at this time a morning when Mary, meeting her lover upon the moor, set out to spend a long holiday beside him. But the holiday was for her alone: she would watch Nicholas at his work. The splendour of the day heartened the warrener, and the tenderness of Mary made him very glad. Of late he had banished immediate uneasiness concerning Hannah by the expedient of escaping knowledge. He heard nothing touching events at Cherrybrook Farm, and, hoping against his judgment that all was well, turned his mind to his future wife, and pretended with himself that she entirely filled it. To-day he was well content, yet Mary proved tearful and absent; a cloud shadowed her despite the sweet air, the auburn glory of the fern, the sunshine above and the glimmering dewy gossamers that spread jewels beneath her feet. As they trudged together Nicholas bent down and looked under her sun-bonnet into Mary's face.

"Why, pretty heart! What's the matter? Here I go chattering an' prattling, an' you be wisht an' wet-eyed all the time! Tell me what's troubling 'e, an' I wager I'll very soon make nought of it."

"'Tis naught, dear Nicholas—only my foolishness; but, do you know that this be the first time we've met for a fortnight? A fortnight—a thousand years to me."

"'Tis a cruel long while, an' I know it very well, an'

I've spun the thought of you into five hundred copper wires. But you'm not blaming me, Mary? Don't say that."

"No, no—only—but no matter now. We be going to have a whole, lovely day together; an' I be going to help, not hinder. I've been thinking a lot lately about things."

"An' so have I. Tell me your thoughts an' I'll tell you a bit of mine."

"As to that—mine was just little hopeful plans for when we'm married—the house an' so on. No hurry of course, but——"

"But there ban't no 'but,' or shouldn't be. 'Tis that I've thought about too. There be hurry—I'm in a hurry. My waking thought to-day was to ax myself why you were at Bray Farm 'stead of to Wistman's Wood along o' me. When shall us be married, Mary? Or do 'e like keeping company better?"

"Oh, Nick!"

This great matter soon dried the girl's tears. It had for some months been a grief to her that Nicholas was so well content to remain betrothed. Since asking her to marry him, he had never again alluded to marriage until the present moment. She had heard her mother and Jacob Vosper discuss the same question when they did not know that she was by. But her discontent, though sometimes it led to terror, more often listened to reason. She argued with herself that this man, after his first experience of a woman, might naturally desire many days to pass and a sure understanding to obtain before finally he took her to wife. At other times she reflected morbidly upon her own worthlessness; and when a fortnight passed without a visit from Nicholas, she began to go in fear that he had changed his mind.

That he could actually discuss a date was a circumstance beyond her wildest hope. Merely to name marriage with some vague allusion to next year had well contented her; and indeed she became so excited now, that she grew giddy and, under pretext of resting, sat down awhile and relaxed her hold on the basket

that held their dinner. For a time she remained without speaking, and Edgecombe, perceiving that his words had moved her, continued hastily on the same theme.

"Why for shouldn't you come to me afore winter, Mary? But perhaps 'tis selfish to ax that, for the fine snow do sometimes drift through the wood walls, though how I never could find."

"Snow! I'd come if your home was a fox's earth 'stead of the dearest li'l house 'pon Dartmoor. I'd like to see snow as would frighten me from my dear!"

"Well, then, come you shall, if you will. I don't want to wait no more for 'e; an' 'twill be a glad an' joyous day for me when you fix the time, sweetheart."

Conversation now flowed like a river, and, walking upon air with her soul intoxicated, Mary moved beside her lover. They passed beneath Longaford's stone mitre, and presently stood above the huge plain wherein old, ruined powder-mills lay scattered and Cross Ways Farm appeared. Cherrybrook's course could be observed almost from her springs to her confluence with Dart. Five miles away, concealed by low undulations of the moor, stood Oldreive's homestead beside the stream, and Mary, noting the spot, knew what the brown hills hid there. Her manner became subdued, for memories not happy clouded her heart's sunshine. Edgecombe felt the sudden shadow though she did not speak. He looked into her face, therefore, followed her eyes and guessed at what had made his girl so grave.

"Haven't heard about they folks for a month of Sundays," he said. "No news be good news, I hope. Must trust the man will be so good as his promises. When did you last see him?"

A recent occasion on which Mary had watched Oldreive was very fresh in her memory. The farmer had brought his young mare to Two Bridges that he might sell her; and there, with many others, she had watched him exhibiting the creature's powers in a paddock behind the "Ring 'o Bells." Hurdles were erected and

the intending buyer with his friends arrived from the inn. Unfortunately, Oldreive's young hunter proved perverse. For some equine or feminine reason she declined to exhibit her cleverness and refused repeatedly. Then Timothy lost his temper, knowing that he had lost his bargain, and struck the beast over the head. Terrified at such unfamiliar treatment, the mare incontinently bolted, and she might have destroyed herself and her rider but for a moment's pause during which Oldreive slipped off her and certain men reached her head. The farmer's passion was very clearly recollected by Mary Merle; and she also remembered that those who beheld the scene declared he must be drunk. Now she told the story to Edgecombe.

"A very unfortunate thing, sure enough," he admitted. "An' what was the last you heard tell about his wife?"

"I can't remember now. 'Tis so long since anybody have seen her. She bides at home all her time, they say."

"I don't like that news. I've feared a good deal of late in my inmost mind that it might be so; an' yet I've hoped 'twas well."

He waited for Mary to speak, but she did not do so, and he continued—

"I can't get her words out of my head—last time I saw her. Putting her faith in church-going she was; an' axed for you an' me to go along to church with her. But somehow I couldn't bring myself to do it. Why for I don't know."

Still Mary did not reply. She was looking down into the valley and he did not observe her face. She had grown very white, and the brown freckles stood sharply out upon her pale skin.

Suddenly, turning still further from him, she spoke with an effort.

"Do you love her yet, Nicholas?"

He looked at the speaker helplessly. The egregious question was met by egregious silence.

But after a significant interval Edgecombe spoke, and he replied implicitly, not directly.

"She's suffered a deal more than any woman ever I heard of, an' I can't fail to be interested very deep in her. She's that brave, an' her bravery be dumb all these many days. I've heard nothing."

"Why should you hear?"

"Well, you see, 'tis vain to pretend I'm quite out of her thoughts. She've got nobody to stand up for her—not that I—"

He broke off and surveyed his inner nature uneasily. Then Mary wheeled round and came close to him, and he saw her face set and aged.

"All this ban't true to yourself, Nicholas," she said quietly, "an' it's hurting me—hurting me terrible cruel. 'Tis too up an' down for a woman made as I be made. Answer my straight question an' be honest with me, as you are with every man. It hurt you bad to hear me ax you if you loved her; yet fitter I should know than go in doubt. Do you love Hannah better than me? Oh, say it out if you do! If her misery alters what you feel to me, say it an' let me know I'm second an' not first. If I'm not first, I'm nought. Anyway, know this: Hannah Oldreive be leading a dog's life an' worse. She'll go down, down—for her hope's dead—killed by him—an' her life be a long torment. That's all true; an' if 'tis going to change your thought towards me, speak it out straight an' honest. If it breaks me—well, what's one woman? I've had a little love from 'e—more'n I deserve. I'll go an' hug the memory of it, an' be very proud of it; for 'twas better to be loved a little by you than all the days of my life by any other man."

Her drawn face, her trembling lips and eyes smote his heart.

"Most right you are to speak so, and I do merit sharper words than these tender ones of yours, Mary. I don't deserve such a woman as you at all. You'm a million times too good for me. Somehow I've never felt clean outside of Hannah Oldreive's life; but I am, an' 'tis very right you should remind me I am."

"I've lived in a great fear these many days, Nicholas," she said sadly. "I haven't understood how much of

you was mine. I knowed very well as I could never be what she was. But I thought the part of you that loved her was dead. I didn't mind how little was left for me so long as I had all that little—all—all, Nick. . . . An' of late my hopes seemed slipping an' failing one by one; an' it made me cold to my bones to find you could bide away two weeks. Each night when I went into bed—but oh, my dear, I can't give 'e up now—not to nobody—I can't do it. I talk fierce an' look fierce, but my spirit be milk an' water. I can't give 'e up. I'll cling tight hold of 'e with all my power, an' you'll have to tear me away, like moss off a stone, afore I'll go!"

He calmed her with many words. He expressed utmost contrition for the grief that he had made her suffer. He took her upon his knees and kissed her tears away. His plain admission of error set her panting heart at rest and his declaration of love and longing soothed her spirit.

From that moment the day grew beautiful to them both, and to the end of it Edgecombe maintained a gentle regard and a true lover's attitude, that had satisfied the most exacting maid. In this he was honest, for no lingering doubt arose. Moreover, he felt deeply shamed that she should have been called upon to speak and suffer thus. Justly he blamed himself that his abstractions of mind had been so visible; he took himself to task for having played a coward's part to both women. This better understanding with Mary also showed him his mistake concerning Hannah. He believed that he had erred to keep away from her; he felt that his reason for doing so was mean.

Of Oldreive's wife, however, he did not speak again. She dropped out of their conversation and out of Mary's mind also in the splendour of this new harmony. But Nicholas hid rather than banished Hannah. He knew that he must take some definite course in so vital a matter. He was sufficiently familiar with himself to be sure that he could not

watch her sufferings daily increase. He determined to arrive at conclusions when alone, and submit his decision to Mary upon their next meeting ; but for the present he dismissed these problems and went about his business.

The day passed swiftly and happily ; then returning home with Mary, and stopping to supper at Bray Farm, Nicholas announced that he desired to marry before the winter, and that his sweetheart offered no objection to the plan. Teddy Merle was more than usually silent on the occasion of this meal. He had heard evil news concerning the folk at Cherrybrook, and he knew that Edgecombe would also learn it before he slept that night. The boy kept silence, however, and merely occupied himself with wondering how his friend would receive these tidings. Teddy cared nothing himself, for he was backward in development, and still indifferent as a child to the sufferings of other people.

Departing from the farm at ten o'clock, and pursuing his way over the moonlit vastness of Bair Down, Edgecombe fell straight upon the matter in his mind. He came to a sort of conclusion with himself by the time that he reached home, but, arrived at Wistman's Wood, there was that awaiting him which scattered his own imaginings, and broke like the harsh reality of thunder upon a summer-day dream.

As he opened his door, something whiter than the moonlight caught his eye, and he picked up a letter. Sorrow Scobhull had carried this message, and young Merle had met him on his way. It then transpired that Scobhull, wroth with his master, had conveyed a letter behind Oldreive's back from Hannah to the warrener. Its contents the labourer knew not, but he explained to Teddy that life at Cherrybrook Farm rapidly became intolerable. This letter, indeed, was outcome of a tragic incident which Scobhull refused to divulge to Teddy ; but now, lifting the message from his threshold, Edge-

combe lighted a candle, and read the things set down.

"DEAR NICHOLAS,—I didn't come to writing this letter till Oldreive got to blows. And I wouldn't write to you if it wasn't for the child, and not even then if there was anybody else. Only if you look around you will see I have not got a friend in the world to turn to except you. And you are the last man I ought to claim for a friend, yet there is none else. I don't want to make you sorry for me, or any such thing, but the man beats me very cruel. I've said no hard word to him, and I've asked God to forgive him. Do not come to see me here, for he is raging against you again, and against everybody for that matter. He be ashamed for the minute at what he done this morning, and his shame makes him watch me like a cat a mouse, but he's out of the way now, an' I'll get Scobhull to take this to you if I can. Meet me next Tuesday mid-day on the Moreton road, at the bridge over Cherrybrook. He be going to see lawyer at Ashburton that morning. For love of the weak just let me see you, Nicholas, if it is only a minute. I'll make no silly fuss, my dear, or ask you to do any fool's trick, for I'm an honest woman now, and be trying with all my might to do right. That's why I see God's hand even in this man He hath flung me to. Oldreive can rip the devil out of anything but himself. Horse or man, dog or woman, they've no chance against him ; but they all hate him but me. I don't hate him, only I don't want him to kill me, and that he'll soon do at this rate.

"Please to meet me where I say and tell me if you can think of anything to turn the man. He's drinking dreadful, and he's not got any money, and he says we must turn out afore winter. He says he can be helped to go to Australia or somewhere. Can't nothing be done? I want to live for the child—else I would not mind if I died. And I want to show the world you was not quite out in your reckoning when you loved me so dear. But that's all foolishness. But you must forgive

me writing a soft word, for I never hear none an' never shall no more. Yet, when my dear little boy do learn to speak, perhaps I shall hear a soft word or two again.
—Your friend HANNAH."

"For God's sake, help me."

Nicholas Edgecombe, flinging himself upon his bed, rested for some hours, but he did not sleep. Then, before it was yet day, he went out to the warren and worked until morning with a mind bent upon this responsibility. The postscript of the woman's letter fired his spirit.

CHAPTER XVIII

A HEART

SUCCESS serves to sweeten the average man ; unsuccessful is the heroical test for heroes. In the case of Timothy Oldreive sustained failure was more than sufficient to wreck him, and his resolutions, sown in vanity and ignorance, brought forth but sterile flowers, soon scorched and blown away by the wind of tribulation. He was a weak and feeble copy of his father, but lacked the parental intelligence and selfish jealousy to preserve life. The father had scoffed at all things spiritual and left his carcase a legacy to hounds ; but he had been very obedient to all natural laws ; he had dwelt in strict conformity with Nature and ordered his existence to maintain a healthy body. His physical life was wholesome to the end, and those statutes whose breaking breeds material punishment he had carefully kept. While a bad man, the father of Oldreive was a good animal. His wealth had gratified his passions, his wit had restrained them. He was that sort of being whose highest happiness can be purchased ; but his son, cast in feebler mould, now fell from misfortune into intemperance and ceased even to be a satisfactory brute. He felt the bitter probe of poverty at last, and found himself bankrupt of money, friends and courage. He went hither and thither crying out against the hardness of the world and blaming his circumstances rather than himself. He began to drink hard and there arose in him two dominating hatreds : one for his wife and one for a man of Ashburton at whose mercy he now lay. This money-lender was merely just, and Oldreive's entanglements arose from the fact that he had not observed his compact in a bar-

gain and, while borrowing money, had allowed the interest to run against him. The rate was reasonable, but, accumulating on a compound principle as result of non-payment, now cried for the farm to meet it. His mean failure worked to ferocity in Oldreive. Hannah suffered most from this catastrophe and a series of unhappy incidents, in which the woman by keeping her temper drove the man to viler extremes, culminated with the outrage of blows. Until that time her new faith supported her and she felt a sort of martyr's joy in such sufferings ; but assault, physical pain and the danger of death at his hand, terrified her. Therefore she wrote to Nicholas Edgecombe and prevailed with Scobhull to carry the letter while his master was out of the way.

Now Nicholas waited for the appointment, and burnt with impatience and pity. He could not disguise the emotion in his heart : he felt the old worship for her ; and while he knew that her inner life was better ordered, despite the chaos of visible existence, he was also aware that she still looked to him, still trusted him with herself and her future. In truth he loved two women most truly, and his conscience, being educated to regard that state a sin, reduced him to shame. Yet the fact could not be denied. The joy of Mary was his joy ; the darkness and night into which Hannah's life had now descended, were night and darkness to him. He grew desperate before this problem and fell into a recklessness of mind that craved outlet in some definite deed. Gloom stole over the new dawn of faith. His heart again hardened towards the divinity that could thrust such a puzzle upon him while denying the intelligence to solve it, and he woke into fresh hatred of Oldreive.

Then it seemed that some power granted the thing he craved, yet had dared not breathe to himself. The necessity for meeting his enemy hand to hand was violently thrust upon him ; while honour and manhood absolved him of the worst evil that might result from such an encounter.

Two days before his tryst with Hannah, Edgecombe heard himself called, and looking down from the side of a hill near Two Bridges, saw a man making frantic signals. Suspecting some accident to horse and cart, the warrener went down as speedily as possible, and, upon the Moreton road, found Sorrow Scobhull. He was white and breathless with fear and haste.

"Thank God you chanced on this side the Moor, for life or death be in it. See that—my arm tored with small shot—I runned, an' he fired to stop me. He'd have done murder if he could. Maybe he have by now. He was down by the river waiting for the otter hounds as meet for the last time this season 'pon West Dart. He went to keep out o' the way of trouble, I reckon. But afore he'd been gone an hour, the bailiff's men comed from Ashburton. An' missis—poor woman—ran to tell him. Then he turned upon her most furious, an' said she'd ruined his life, an' hit her on the bosom, an' foamed at the mouth like a horse. I got between 'em, an' he fell on me an' hurled me out of the road; then I bethought me of you an', like a fool, bawled out that I was coming straight for you. With that re fired, but only just caught me on the arm, an' I held on."

'I'll go this instant moment," said Nicholas. He flung off his coat and started as he spoke, but stopped for a moment to ask a question.

"Wwere be they?"

"By Bawker's Pools, under Prince Hall."

Then the warrener started to run four miles. He longed to mend his pace, but preserved a slow trot to save himself for what might lie before him. Behind him followed Scobhull.

To the steady pant of his lungs and the throb of his pulses Edgecombe became hot in body and in mind. His boiling blood mounted to his head and he grew mad for this ill-used woman. He cared for nothing on the earth save Hannah now, and no power but that of gravitation restrained him any more. He defied all ordinances of spirits or of men, for he intended that

Hannah and the infant should sleep under his roof that night if his right arm could bring it about.

She had cried to him to save her more than once, while he, standing idle, had shrunk from her on one side, from his God upon the other. Now, right or wrong, she should be freed and feel that a man had saved her. He would sweep her husband out of her way and take her to himself; and let those who could understand. All other interests and relations of life were blotted out in that hour. Only a suffering woman's voice came to his ear; and he welcomed it, for it cried his own justification. In thought he saw the brute strike her bosom—that most lovely bosom—and he raged like a furious fire, lengthened his stride, lusted for the closing of the account at last. It seemed to him long hours before he stood on the meadow below Prince Hall Farm and saw Dart winding beneath him. Then he slowed his pace, for he was breathless and the next deed might call for strength.

Descending a furze-clad down, he saw twin pools and the river dammed between them by huge boulders of a natural weir. Above and below this obstruction was deep water, and from the higher to the lower, Dart leapt and spouted in foaming falls. To "Bawker," a spirit of rivers and wells, was this wild spot dedicate; but for sportsmen it possessed significance more practical, because the otters loved it. Long afterwards Edgecombe recollected how music of hounds had reached his ear from the recesses of the valley at the moment of his approach.

Now, gazing sharply before him, the warrener discovered one figure alone upon the further bank of the river. There a woman sat with her face in her hands, and he recognized her and hastened on. But no man was visible to him. As he passed a boulder on the bank of the upper pool, where a hawthorn rose all brushed with scarlet fruit, he lifted his voice and shouted:

"Hannah! Hannah! I be come—an' I ban't never going to leave you no more!"

At the same moment there was a rush like a tiger out of the brake fern, and Timothy Oldreive leapt forth from where he had been hiding by the path. Hannah, turning and rising to her feet at the voice, saw her husband, with his gun clubbed, fall upon Nicholas and strike with all his power. The younger man, expecting Edgecombe, had watched his enemy afar off; had left Hannah then, on pretext of returning home; had crossed the river and hidden where he knew Edgecombe must pass.

Nicholas carried nothing and the blow aimed at his head must have killed him on the spot had it fallen where his enemy intended; but Oldreive's weapon so used was clumsy; now swung with the frenzy of blind passion, it missed its mark and came down on a flat rock in the path. The barrels broke from the splintered stock and the gun was ruined. Before the farmer could recover his balance Edgecombe had closed with him, but a battle that now raged between them was more protracted and more uncertain of issue than might have been foretold. Oldreive fought without one restraining idea. He lived to destroy his enemy, and exerted the strength of a madman; while Edgecombe was short of breath after running. At first the lighter man's agility served him. He broke away, struck hard and often, avoided the warrener's tremendous fist as it swung without skill, and tempted him of set purpose to the edge of the river. Timothy planned to throw his opponent into the water, and knew that if once there, he might beat Edgecombe's brains out easily enough, supposing he himself was able to remain upon the bank.

Then, while the bigger man held off and delayed to get wind, Oldreive suddenly remembering that he carried a weapon, dragged a heavy clasp knife from a leather sheath in his belt, and opened it with his teeth, his eyes on the other. Neither spoke, and Nicholas took gigantic breaths to increase his reserve of force. Then, getting slowly nearer, and keenly alive to his enemy's object in keeping so near the water, he dashed at him suddenly, with design to catch the hand that

held the knife. But Timothy, keeping his right arm low, avoided the onset by a sudden movement. Thus occupied, however, he made no provision for Edgecombe's charge, and, catching the full brunt of it, went down heavily. The impact with earth jerked his right hand up, and his blade slashed deep along the left side of Nicholas and made a great flesh wound. He stabbed again and cut the warrener's hand to the bone. Then Edgecombe caught Oldreive's right wrist in his own bloody fingers, bent it back and broke it. He heard the bone snap, and saw the knife leap out of his enemy's hand into the water.

At this moment the warrener's eyes were arrested by a spectacle that made him forget the immediate matter. Hannah had stood a silent spectator of this battle until she saw her husband's knife flash; then, impressed with the terrible advantage such a weapon must give him, and indifferent to her own fate, she essayed to reach the fighters and thrust herself between them.

Her nearest road extended along the mossy weir between Bawker's Pools—a path that asked for presence of mind and a sure foot. In any case it had been dangerous for a woman with no strong hand extended to steady her at the crucial mid-way leap. Here, between two great stones, Dart's main volume fell in a glassy wave from pool to pool, and the rocks on either side were mossy and always wet with spray. This leap of four feet Hannah now took with her eyes on the men and not upon her alighting spot. And even as Nicholas cried to her to be careful for her life, she slipped and fell back upon the great wave of water. One hand tore the moss from the stones; one cry escaped her; then her mouth was stopped and she went down into deep water and vanished from the sight of the watching men.

The object and centre of concern was now shifted for both of them. Nicholas, forgetting Oldreive, and only aware that Hannah was drowning ten yards off, turned to save her; the farmer even in his agony rejoiced that

the woman's end had come. Now he used all his maimed powers to hold back Edgecombe from rescuing his wife, and, as the other turned, Timothy attacked him like a wounded beast. He got his left arm round Edgecombe's neck, and fastened upon the man's right shoulder with his teeth. There he hung like a bull-dog, and strove to drag the other off his legs to the ground again. Twice Nicholas attempted to shake him off but failed. Then the warrener gasped out a word or two.

"She's there drowning—she's come up once an' gone down again. Let me go or you'll be her murderer!"

Oldreive growled but did not open his jaws, until brute force was answered by greater, and the red man, gripping his opponent's neck in his hands, began to strangle him. The farmer's teeth came away a moment later and blood leapt after them; then with an awful blow Edgecombe hurled the man backwards, and himself rushed to the lower waters. But Timothy, dropping in an unconscious heap on the edge of the upper pool, rolled over the bank and fell in.

A small and shining beast, with terrified eyes, squat black muzzle and thick tail, was paddling for dear life along the side of the river. Alarmed by the struggling men, more alarmed by the distant hounds, it ran a little way upon the bank, then again entered the water and swam forward.

Sorrow Scobhull observed the otter, but hastened on, for he had sighted the men below. Now he saw them separate; and while one dropped into the water, the other ran a step or two and leaped into the second pool. Ignorant of any reason for these actions, he rushed forward; and as he did so, the spirit that haunted him cried with a loud voice.

Now he reached the bank and found a man drowning under it within a yard of him. Oldreive's eyes stared up at his salvation, and he screamed to Scobhull and sank screaming, for he could not swim. Then he rose to the surface again and beat the water and scratched the air, and fought vainly to reach the bank that was but one foot beyond his grasp.

"Save me, save me, for Christ's sake!" he cried, and sank again before he could hear the answer.

"'Tis you, not 'tother; an' for Christ's sake I'll let 'e alone. I'd have saved Nicholas, God A'mighty drown me in hell fire for ever if I wouldn't, but not you—you'm best where you be."

Oldreive came up again, and the labourer gazed dumbly upon him with eyes as hard as brown flints. The drowning man could not speak, but he stared, and death stamped a dreadful seal upon his face as the water swept between him and his life. White bubbles in a string came up out of the darkness and broke upon the river. To Scobhull they carried a soul to the surface, and, bursting, set a spirit free. One great grunt rose from the watching man.

"Thank God them awful eyes be took off me . . . what a muck o' sweat. . . . a heart at last——"

Suddenly shouts forced themselves into his mind and called his attention to the fact that many people were near, and that a hundred yards below his stand-point hounds were working and excited men hastening up the river. In the lower pool he saw Edgecombe trying to keep Hannah's head above the water. Thereupon he bawled to the approaching hunt and himself crept into the river up to his breast. Then terror froze him, and as the warrener disappeared, he struggled back.

When Nicholas had reached the lower pool, after escaping from his enemy, one white arm waved there, and with what strength remained to him, he swam for it. Diving, he grasped the woman and got her head above water, but unhappily she was conscious: she clung to him in the terror of death and dragged him under. He freed himself, then clutched her again to find her inert, and as he supposed, dead. Now it remained for him to swim four yards before he could touch bottom, but thus weighted he found the effort beyond his power. He was going down and strength failed fast. Iron hands stretched from beneath and dragged at him. For a moment or two he managed to sustain Hannah's

head above water ; then he began to sink ; noises roared in the air ; a deep bell sounded ; water bubbled and hissed into his ears and mouth ; the sharp agony of asphyxia came and passed ; the venous blood loaded his brain and he felt himself sink peacefully into fields of soft, waving grasses all black and flowered with gold. He sank well satisfied and glad to go. He knew that Hannah was with him and that Hannah was happy. They were sinking together through a still meadow where ambient light, shed from no sun, lapped them with a cool, close atmosphere thicker than air. It sparkled and blazed into an unearthly star. Then the sound of mighty waters and great winds rolled over him ; the light broke into burning flames ; keen agony overwhelmed him as he felt the knife of the outer air getting into his lungs again, and consciousness returning to his brain. His eyes opened and he saw men dragging his arms up and down and distending his chest. His lips quivered, he blew away froth and blood from them and spoke thickly.

"My tongue's bit in half," he said ; then he asked for Hannah.

"She's all right," a voice answered him. "Don't talk—you've had a devil of a squeak. You've been bleeding like a pig."

Elsewhere others of the otter hunt were fashioning a drag of stones, hurdles and broken barbed wire from a fence. The sportsmen in response to Scobhull's cries had reached the lower pool less than a minute after Edgecombe and Hannah sank there. A couple of young men were after them in ten seconds, and the water being no more than six feet deep where they had gone down, it was possible quickly to recover them. Two medical men were hunting with the party, and so it fell out that the warrener and Oldreive's wife soon lay stretched upon the bank together under treatment of skilful hands. Hannah was first restored to consciousness, but the man's case proved very serious, for he had deep wounds and blood flowed from him. Science argued there as the two physicians

fought for the life of Nicholas. One held that this letting of blood must determine death; the other, perceiving the enormous strength of the man's body, hoped such a physique might suffice to save him.

While these laboured upon Nicholas to restore animation, Scobhull stood soaking, shivering outside the excited circle of watchers; and he fought a tremendous battle with himself, for it was beyond his knowledge that those who had been drowned could return to life again. He argued that if Edgecombe might thus be brought back to the land of the living, the man now at rest in the upper pool would similarly be restored. "If Edgecombe be gone, I'll speak," he thought. "But if he'm saved alive, I'll never let that anointed villain rise up to plague him more. The river's took many good men; now let her have a bad 'un." But Edgecombe remained unconscious and fear suddenly prompted Scobhull to tell what he alone knew.

"You'd best to see after t'other instead of staring 'pon this chap here," he cried. "They fought—I seed 'em far off—and Edgecombe jumped in to save this woman; an' 'tother fell in up there under the bank; an' he bides at the bottom now."

A dozen made a rush under the labourer's direction, and they did not hesitate to throw hard words at him, and hint that he might prove a murderer. He answered as though still in a dream.

"'Tis Timothy Oldreive lies there—that's why I thought twice. I won't lift one finger to give him another breath of life. Enough good air have been wasted a'ready to keep him living. You'll do as you mind to; but them who knows him will tell 'e that he's better where 'e be. Look at my shoulder—all tored wi' biird shot; look at that man there, stabbed and gashed to pieces; look upon that woman, an' see where his fists have blackened her body. There he lies now, in ten good feet o' water, right under they rushes on the bank. An', for my part, I hope to God Dart's done for him, for never she drowned a thing better dead."

Three men were already in the water, but to reach Oldreive was beyond their power, for the river proved very deep. Then with drags, made from a fence of posts and wires, they scraped the bottom, and presently drew the master of Cherrybrook Farm back to the air again. He had been under water nearly half an hour. Already his features were relaxed and pallid. Peace had returned to brood upon them, and they were cast in the eternal composure of death. Scobhull gazed with unwinking eyes, and could ill credit that this most placid countenance was that he had seen a short while since perishing in terror and frenzy. Oldreive's eyelids were but half closed, and the dilated pupils under them seemed yet to shine and reflect a living brain. But the coldness of his body was intense, and his heart had ceased to beat.

For five hours, until the evening lights burnt redly, men laboured at the body of Timothy Oldreive, and feared it for a corpse, yet persevered with human ardour to save a human life.

Scobhull watched them, and remained like a being turned into stone, with his face upon the dead.

"You can't fight Dart, your honours," he said. "Her've let off two to-day. Ban't in reason her be going to lose all three."

Then the doctors ceased from their labour, and pronounced Timothy Oldreive's life at an end. So they lifted him up and carried him to his home.

Meantime Hannah and Nicholas Edgecombe had been conveyed to Prince Hall Farm, close at hand, and there both were ministered to by medical direction. The woman, from whom her husband's death was concealed, speedily regained her strength, and promised a quick recovery; but the warrener took longer to satisfy his rescuers that he might be left to Nature.

CHAPTER XIX

FREE

AT the "Ring o' Bells" familiar forms assembled, and drank and waited with customary interest for events that by no means concerned them. A fortnight had passed since the catastrophe on Dart; Timothy Oldreive slept in the earth; Edgecombe was still at Prince Hall, where Mary Merle and Mr Chugg's wife had nursed him through his illness; and to-day Hannah, now restored to health, was coming from her home that she might visit her mother. The old tenement farm of Cherrybrook would soon see her no more; but extra time had been granted to the widow, in consideration of her distressing circumstances. Ere long, however, Hannah and the child would return to live at Two Bridges with Betty Bradridge, unless anything happened to change their destiny.

Merryweather Chugg had uttered many hundred opinions touching the tragedy at Bawker's Pools, and had gleaned innumerable moral lessons therefrom. A sensation so tremendous awakened the sleeping self-consciousness of the humblest native, and every man went about his labours with a conviction that the world's eye was turned upon him. Daily all met, and wallowed in the congenial theme. But Sorrow Scobhull, by common consent, suffered a frosty ostracism. He returned to breaking of stones upon the highway, and only one man who knew him did not shirk his acquaintance. That man was Jacob Vosper. He procured Scobhull a lodging far removed from the centre of his former labours, and looked to it that he should find employment some miles away from his usual haunts.

Now, while certain persons waited to see Hannah

arrive, conversation touched Scobhull, and Chugg argued against the company.

"Vosper have over-persuaded me," he said; "he's got a very big pattern of mind an' be a better Christian than us, an' he'm right an' we be wrong. The thing chanced because God ordained. 'Tis all of a piece, an' ban't often we'm allowed to see the Almighty's plotting so clear. Sorrow Scobhull comed in the world the day his faither was drowned. His infant lips did suck the milk of a daft woman. An' so it fell, by the dark plan of his Maker, that he of all men was sent to see Oldreive perish; an' what would have been murder in me or you, be no more than a visitation o' God marked by the eye of his chosen fool. He ban't all man exactly. He've got eyes like a camel—a queer beast I once seed at a circus. Us mustn' blame Scob for leaving his master in the water, no more'n us must blame Edgcombe for knocking him in. The thing was written."

Betty Bradridge nodded and declared herself of the same mind.

"'Tis all right for the stone-breaker," she said, "but all wrong for Timothy Oldreive—cut off wi' blood on his head an' murder in his heart."

"The life of a man weighs the balance, not the death of him," said Chugg, and Betty continued.

"I was the only living soul that followed him to the grave; I was the only human creature that felt one pang for him. I know what I tell be true. There were sparks of good in him, but nobody ever blowed upon them when he was young. He had so good blood as any in Cornwall in him. He was a gentleman. 'Tis terrible to me he wasn't allowed time. Such strivings after right as he made! If the wish to do right was the same as the way, us should all be saints, for nobody born of woman but longs to be better'n he is sometimes."

"The will did ought to make the way," declared Mr Chugg.

"You'm all for him now he'm dead, ma'am," said Axworthy.

"Though you wouldn't have him live again, I suppose?" asked Mark Trout.

"No," she admitted, "for my darter's sake I'd not call him back if I could ; though for his own sake, as a Christian woman, it might be my duty. Thank God us ban't called to decide if a man shall have a second chance."

Then she turned to Merryweather Chugg and whispered of a great matter at her heart.

"As you very wisely speak, 'tis God's doing ; an' I hope an' pray this ban't all. Why for shouldn't Hannah an' Nicholas come together presently? 'Twould be a seemly an' a happy thing for both of 'em. An' us knows he loves her still with all his soul, for he let it out when he was raving in deliriums. Your wife heard un do it ; an' so did Mary Merle. Such a thing would lighten my old heart, I can tell 'e ; for there's a cruel devil always at my ear now, an' it tells how this evil be of my breeding from first to last."

"You don't know Nicholas Edgecombe," answered the water bailiff.

"But I do. When a man's on a sick bed, empty of blood, weak as water, wi'out one spark of nature in him more'n enough to keep him alive—then you do know him ; for there's no wit left to hide nothing, an' death be the only thought in his brain. He said it many times. Mary knows. He've lest out his secret in his sickness, same as poor Timothy let out many a secret in drink."

"An' 'tis so base to remember one as 'tother. Such blabbing shouldn't count against us—not unless there's a flat crime told. 'Tis a cowardly thing, ma'am, to heed a man's words if his mind ban't behind his tongue to guide it."

"Mary Merle did heed, however ; an' neither you nor me need fret ourselves, for it ban't in our hands to play this out."

There was a sound of wheels and Hannah arrived. She looked furtively about her as though in a trance. She returned no salutation, but hastened as quickly as possible into the house, while behind her followed a little maid with her child. Indeed she had no mind for speech with neighbours just then. Her heart and soul were full of one overpowering sentiment. She had been

permitted to see Nicholas Edgecombe on her way from home and they had just parted.

At Prince Hall, in a deep window facing upon the south, sat the warrener, now convalescent, and, as Hannah came to him, she was conscious that a weary-eyed woman slipped from the room. The woman would not look at her, but hurried past and disappeared as quickly as possible. That she recollected afterwards, but in the supreme moment of seeing Nicholas again she had no ear or eye for any other being. His voice reached her and she forgot everything else in the world but her saviour. So they met for the first time since Oldreive's drowning.

"Let me look at you, Hannah," he said. "Stand afore me. This is a great sight for me—to see you alive an' well; though a terrible price be paid."

She stood before his eyes, then came and took his hand, but could not speak for a moment. He saw that she had returned already to something of her maiden mien. Her eyes were misty and bright, her head was held erect as of old, but her face remained very pale. Hannah wore heavy weeds, and they assorted well with her wonderful hair and noble figure. Now she spoke in a few broken words.

"To see you—to see you again!"

"Your little boy be well, they tell me," said Nicholas. He seemed in a dreamy and soulless frame of mind—mentally supine—as a man but half conscious, when suddenly wakened from sleep.

She nodded and still held his hand. Then, looking down, she saw that it was almost pale—a circumstance that terrified her by its strangeness. The red-gold hair shone on the first joint of the fingers. She regarded his face closely, and found it thin and lined. Nicholas wore a beard, and she hated the sight of it, for it made him appear much older. She released his hand, and kneeling by him hid her face in the loose gown that he wore and sobbed.

"Don't die—don't say you'm going to die!" she said.

He answered, but did not speak to her words.

"Be sure I've thought a very great deal about you, Hannah, an' dreamed about you, too, for that matter. I've seen you and spoke with you these many nights—as real as you are now. An' you'd forgived me, too, for what I done. But 'twas all air; an' now I've got to begin at the beginning an' pray you to forgive me in earnest. I killed your son's father."

"An' saved my son's mother, as please God will bring her little boy up honest. You saved my life an' I'm glad now, for I wanted to live a bit. I've never brought myself to think us was quite separated—never that is till—but now—now I can't thank you nor pay you, more'n a bird pays for crumbs. You saved my life: that was your revenge for all I had done against you."

"I'm sick an' weary of stopping in one room so long," he said, still inconsequent and vague. "'Tis the losing of so much blood disabled me so dreadful; but blood be making again in me fast, they say. Each day I can grip harder."

He pressed upon her arm to show his strength.

"So you only live, nought else matters," she said.

"I shall live. As for life, perhaps 'twas a crueller revenge in me to save you than you think for. While there's life, I doubt there's no peace. But he—he be out of it. Perhaps where he be—in the hand of his God, he laughs to hear us pity him."

"If I could live for you, I'd welcome life."

He shook his head.

"You an' me will do better to curse each other than be soft. I'd rather you hated me for saving you, than blessed me. You've done me so much evil that you ought to hate me."

His words soothed rather than hurt her. She understood the motives that made him attempt this attitude, and bent her head and did not answer.

"Cruel—cruel you've been to me," he said. "You've wronged me again an' again."

"An' you've forgived me again an' again, because you'm more an angel than a man," she answered.

"A very black angel. You brought me to the edge

of murder long ago ; then you turned me from it ; you—but you've suffered too. Though you be only twenty-five, your face have a deal of trouble in it, to my eye. There—forgive me trying to talk harsh to you, Hannah. I can't do it, though if I was a man worth calling a man I suppose I ought to. I can't—I can't do it. Oh, if you knowed how I thanked the Lord for letting me save your life !”

“Yes, you saved it. An' please God you'll never be sorry you did. I could find it in my heart to say my life be yours, now you have saved it. But—but I've got my child an' Christ—that's enough.”

“You say it with a weak voice, however.”

She looked at him and he looked away. She could not believe her ears. She was strong and he was weak. Now, out of his weakness, he tempted her. The fatal word needed no second.

“You know—you always know !” she cried. “Heaven bear witness I was trying to be wise. But such wisdom against nature be foolishness. You know my heart—I can't hide nothing from you. You know I love you better'n my God or my child ; you know all my duty be to you. You've got it out of me an' you must bear the brunt of it. You've saved me, an' now I'm all yours to do what you will with. Tell me to die an' I will die ; tell me to live an' I will live—but only for you. There's no wickedness in it, for I've nothing else. All's shadows but you. I only wear black outside while you'm alive. Don't you understand ? 'Tis as if the sun got through a blind man's night an' showed him the world again. I'm free to go on loving you without a stain. An' you—you couldn't have saved me unless you'd loved me true. You comed back to it through pity—you——”

“There was no coming back,” he said wearily. “I never stopped loving you.”

“An' you never will—an' no need you should—say there ban't no need Nicholas.”

He pointed to a mug on the table beside him. It held a bunch of Dame's violet from the Prince Hall garden,”

"Mary——" began the other, and stopped.

"She heard me speak in my sleep. She ministered to me an' held physic to the lips as cried out I loved you best. She've lived in hell, I suppose, since I raved. But she stuck to it an' stopped until this day. Yesterday the doctor said I was well again, an' only needed a week or ten days' more rest here; so yesterday she gived me up. My dreams and midnight cries worked that sharp upon her that she told me she didn't hold me to my word no more. Yes—she gave me up. She heard me when I thought I was in the water along with you; she heard me scream out an' thank the kind, loving heart of Christ that he'd planned to let me drown along with you. This morning, just afore you came, she bid me 'good-bye,' an' put heaven in my reach, an' wouldn't hear me speak. To me now it do seem that my sickness be real an' my return to health a dream—instead of 'tother way about."

Hannah tightened her hold upon his hand again, but she did not answer. Then he continued:—

"You might think that God was tired o' keeping us apart any more. 'Twould be reasonable. . . . An' I never even thanked her. . . . I was dumb."

"Free—free every way. Her could give you up of her own will?"

He nodded and looked out on to the earth and the river.

"From here you can see Dart," he said. "It keeps watch upon this house, same as it keeps watch by Wistman's Wood. There's the pool, to the bend, that you and me was dragged out of."

"Mary have gone not to come back?"

"She flied away home, like the ladybirds. She wouldn't bide for me to thank her. The upper pool was where he died."

"If I'd been here to nurse you, you should have had the blood out of my veins to make up for yours. It can be done."

"I never even thanked her. 'You'm free, Nick, so free as air, for you love her best,' she said to me. Do 'e see they swallows circling? 'Tis time they was away,

for winter's almost knocking ; but they bide a little for their second brood to grow strong on the wing afore their great flight. . . . I never even thanked her, I tell you."

"But you would—you will—us both, I'm sure, must do it, if 'tis true what you tell. Yet I can't count this true—not yet. She's a better woman far than what I be—how much better! But not so lonely. An' I'm as brave as her. I can suffer too—I can give 'e up too, if I must. I've learnt how. I tell you that you love a wicked thing. Mary's better worth having. I'm a pitiful worm beside of she."

"You've larned your lesson an' the meaning of life. You'm perfect now. If us ever married—why, I suppose such happiness might come of it as be beyond the dreams of most folks. But——"

"There be 'buts' beyond our power to pass, an this is one of them," she interrupted. "You've told Mary Merle you be going to marry her—an' yet—an' yet—if she've gived 'e up of her free will——?"

"'Free as air, for you love her best,' was whatshe said."

"If I'd known that I wouldn't have come, I swear I wouldn't, Nicholas. If I'd known you was free 'twould have been wrong to come ; an' 'tis wrong to bide now—with a free man. But I'll be strong to live, Nicholas, because you love me. 'Tis more'n I deserve—much more. 'Tis enough for me to know it. I wanted you once as well as your love—now I'm better'n that. Even to be your servant would be too good reward for me."

"So all's said as you can say. . . . An' I'll say nought," he answered.

She took his hand again, kissed it and went out.

Left alone, he reflected upon this meeting and that which had preceded it. He saw the lovely face and the thin, freckled one ; he heard the renunciation of the maiden who had yielded him back to his first love and tried to pass it lightly off before him that he might not suffer beyond endurance. He retraced the widow's fight for life and happiness, and the song of her heart, and the shrinking back in a breath—the strophe and antistrophe of her conscience and her love.

Still feeble under physical stress and in no case for spiritual battle, Nicholas yearned towards Hannah with all his being. Her touch was as the blood she would have given him so willingly ; her voice entered into his nature and strengthened his very heart-beat. So he sat in thought, with his eyes upon the meadows and the river, his mind with the woman who had left him last.

Mrs Chugg presently appeared with some broth, found Nicholas before the window, and exclaimed at the sight.

"Why! 'tis a brave thing to see you standing 'pon your legs so easy, Mr Edgecombe!"

"I be quite well again," he said simply. "Things happen to a man that work quicker upon him than physic. Mary Merle have given me up, Mrs Chugg. An' I shall marry Hannah Oldreive in fulness of time. Lord's hand be in it no doubt."

The old woman sighed, but did not answer, and Nicholas flushed with feeble anger.

"What be gaping at? Is it a wonderful thing? Seems to me 'tis no more than right, an' proper, an' common sense."

"Us all want for 'e to be happy, I'm sure, my dear man."

"Say 'Lord's hand be in it' then, same as I did. Say the words, I tell you!"

Mrs Chugg looked frightened, for Edgecombe grew hot. Still she was a woman of fearless soul where right and wrong appeared to her involved.

"Lord's hand be in everything," she answered.

A silence fell between them.

Suddenly he returned to his easy chair and sat down and bent his head and hid his face.

"What do I know of the Lord's hand?" he mumbled. "Only that it be heavy. I've turned away again and again, an' tugged at the cord that held me."

Seeing him weak, Mrs Chugg became strong.

"But it haven't broke," she said. "Eat your meat an' don't worrit yourself. You ban't strong enough to pick up the riddle o' life again yet. Be patient an' get your body's strength back first, my dear."

CHAPTER XX

ORDEAL BY FAITH

IN late October Nicholas Edgecombe, now fully restored to strength, toiled upon Wistman's warren with a storm-tossed mind; for as yet the ship of his destiny had reached no haven. His trial for manslaughter was over, and his fellow-men found him not guilty. Now did duty and love hide their true aspects, and it seemed to him, sorely distressed between them, that duty was transformed to love and love to duty. Finally he could no more part them. They mingled in a maddening figure that pointed both to Cherrybrook and to Bray Farm. Sometimes this phantom emerged with vivid outlines and stood distinctly seen and defiant; sometimes she concealed herself in part and withdrew behind a cloud; sometimes one hand alone appeared to direct him; and sometimes the other. Thus between the interference of diverse authorities he stood irresolute, perplexed and suffering.

His spirit therefore sought a guide less contradictory, and upon the morning of Sunday, Nicholas set forth into the Moor that he might seek there that direction he craved. With dawn he was abroad, and his heart told him that the end had come. To Crockern Tor he passed along, where nightly rains under a morning of pure azure glittered around him. It was as though a mist had been caught out of the air, spread upon the waste and woven therein with sunbeams. The dawn light mellowed many a league of sere grasses until earth's habit shone like cloth of gold upon the shoulders of the hills against blue gloom and rosy fore-glow in the western sky. Opulence of

tone, intense purity of each great colour-wave marked that crystal hour; only the granite, peeping grey from red fern and rusty heath, lifted prisms of quartz to the direct sun-rays, and, discovering their rainbow secrets, scattered them separately.

Now Edgecombe marked the ascending smoke that rose from solitary cots and homesteads in the plain beneath him. As each lifted the incense of a human hearth to the morning, he thought of the hands that had lighted it, and the women on their knees by every gathering flame. He knew all of them, for he stood at the centre of his world. The smoke spires rose lazily, and, mingling, drifted eastwards before a gentle wind. Their thin, opaline cloud softened the clean glory of the hour. Where cottages clustered the vapour thickened, but upon the wide, desolate places, over the river valleys and great peat beds, it fined to a delicate and sunlit gauze before the wind.

Nicholas saw the smoke spring from Bray Farm in its grove of beech trees on the hill of Bair Down; then, turning his eyes toward the east, he marked the thatched roof of Cherrybrook, just visible, like a lonely bee-hive far beneath. From thence, too, a thread of smoke arose, and in thought the warrener watched a woman with brown eyes beside the kindling fire. Tomorrow certain days of grace expired, and Hannah would return to her mother at Two Bridges. Now he pursued the perilous task of thinking on her morning's work—the breakfast, the child's bread-and-milk, a subsequent long tramp to Huccaby chapel, that the widow might pray and win some measure of peace there. Surely this day, upon the eve of her departure from Cherrybrook Farm, was a very fitting opportunity to meet her again—a reasonable and proper moment to conclude with her. The sudden faint report of a gun came to his ear and, turning, he saw white smoke waste away amid the Bray Farm trees. Teddy Merle, also astir early, had just shot a hawk. Thus the other woman was brought to his mind again and the eternal libration renewed.

He had seen neither Hannah nor Mary since the day when his betrothed left him a free man at Prince Hall, and Hannah paid her visit in the same hour. He well remembered both events; he recollected every word uttered, every look in the face of each. The smoke above Bray Farm rose grey against the western sky; the smoke from Cherrybrook curled blue as heaven into the brilliance of day. It seemed that the two habitations beckoned him; and one was radiant in the lap of the East, and the other stern and sad-coloured—a place of falling leaves, whence night had but now departed, and which day, as yet, failed to gladden. He stood between the various things these homesteads meant; and, in fancy, he perceived a woman at each portal—waiting and watching there for him.

He had turned of late to the inanimate companions of his life, only to find them dumb. Each venerable oak beside the river was still a separate string for the west wind's harp; but their melodies spoke not to Nicholas. Dart made her music through the valley as of yore, but she was powerless to echo content to him, or to restore the vanished harmonies of his life.

So far this man had suffered life's scalpel without a groan; now, in full strength of body and natural desire, he stood upon this historic granite of Crockern, and shook his fist at fate. Then it seemed that a soft answer followed his wrath. For into his mind, upon this violent act, there came a sudden emotion that had long been stranger there. He asked himself why he thus lifted his hand, as though he would threaten heaven; and his native honesty made answer. The roads lying before him represented right and wrong, as he understood those ideas; and he had broken into rage because he desired the wrong road with all his might, yet was powerless to drag conscience into it.

God hides in good habits. It might well be now that habit would decide this ordeal. The red man grew redder to think that through a month of healthy life he had stuck thus between right and wrong. Mary Merle's thin form and grey eyes took substance

like a ghost, and stood before him. Her shape grew out of the smoke that blew across Dart from her home. Remembering the height and depth of her love, he weighed the measure of her renunciation, and reflected upon her face when she spoke and set him free.

Noon passed, and the sun rose to his low meridian, then turned westward. Now, long miles of the dead brake fern glowed, and a light upon the wilderness reminded him of Hannah's hair. The lichen-clad larches at his feet were dressed in those earth colours she habitually wore; but now he knew that her apparel was black; and he also knew that winter midnight would not be darker than her heart's mourning if he turned away from her. His mind settled down upon Hannah Oldreive then. He thought of her long vigils, and well knew how her heart must throb as each man's footfall echoed hollow on the little bridge before the farm-house door. He remembered that, upon surprises, her blood was wont to leap and flush the lovely world of her cheek, like young dawn running along the sky.

In tardy procession the hours were numbered, and no human soul intruded upon Nicholas. He sat on the natural throne of Crockern, where Timothy Oldreive had once sat, and peered into the dark corners of his spirit, and turned away from them. So now Edgcombe traversed the span of the years, dwelt again in the past, and regarded the uncertain time to come. Slowly through torment he was breaking down the bars of his prison; slowly he was turning once more, with conscious and deliberate intent, to the influence that ceaselessly controlled him. He began to grasp the truth, and perceive that his life's Companion was not shaken off, but still abode within him, still guided, still restrained. In this solemn culmination and crown of his trial, a benignant sense of the unseen diffused itself upon his heart. Now spoke the merciful power that had first worked in dreams, and moved about him in whisperings and monitions; that, gathering force, had exerted invincible ascendancy; that coming close,

familiar, incessant, at last plucked him by the sleeve and declared itself again.

His eyes were opened and he knew it. Nicholas recognised that same sublime figure he had once imagined as moving in these solitudes—the Master he had obeyed and presently rejected. Now He was returned, and with a countenance scarcely changed.

When the sun sank to setting and made a golden mist of the western hills, it was Cherrybrook that retreated into darkness upon the fringe of another night, and the farm in the trees that glowed and shone. Upon this accident of evening, sharp and unexpected agony touched the watching man, for that thatched roof above Hannah's head, hard to resist even at the frank morning hour, now drew him with awful force sunk into the pathos of twilight. He strained his red-rimmed and burning eyes upon it; he panted there with great hard-drawn breaths, like some huge beast dying; he cried out her name and leapt to his feet. His bones jarred as he rose after the long, motionless hours. Then he went headlong down the hill to Cherrybrook Farm. Yet at the highroad, which he must needs cross to follow his desire, he stopped and stood still.

Vastness of dominion and transparent purity of light marked that sunset spectacle. Westward the blue sky faded into green, then brightened to pale gold. Each great hill took the purple shadow of its neighbour; each tor and lofty cairn beamed tenderly with rosy fire, then sank and died away into the oncoming gloom. Impartial night folded to her soft bosom both distant homesteads, so that Cherrybrook and the farm upon the hill alike became invisible. All things grew featureless and vanished. Earth drank up darkness to satiety, then, rolling eastward upon her starry pillows, slept.

And, at the last, with steadfast belief that this widowed woman was not forgotten and that her obscure days, even as his own, were in the hand of God, to be measured according to His will, to be blessed or darkened according to His plan, Nicholas soared upwards into childlike

trust ; laid his absolute and unconditioned faith before the throne of that Man-God he had chosen ; and set his face to the farm upon the hill.

A breath of frost twinkled upon the earth that night, where the Moor—mother of rivers—bared a wintry breast to the young moon, and watched in peace beside the cradles of her babes. Under elemental silence all animate life was suspended ; the unclouded air slumbered unfretted by any breath ; far away infant Dart alone made a murmuring and cried to her sister. Their springs were a mirror for heaven ; because, where these lesser waters wakened, starlight moved upon the face of them and wound a tendril of pure silver into their tremorous beginnings. And thus the secrets of the everlasting universe mingled with each new-born fountain as the river leapt to her destiny from the heart of that uplifted land.

THE END

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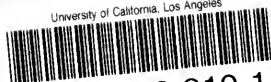
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